

Dear Joe & Linda,

January 27, 2008

This year I'm merging our holiday letter with Marge's birthday letter, so here goes:

My mother's dementia is managed by a neurologist at the Dartmouth Hitchcock Medical Center whose name is David Coffey. He's a great guy, part doctor, part poet-philosopher, and he's a great admirer of Marge's. He begins each session by asking her about appetite, sleep, and other aspects of her physical and mental condition. Once that's out of the way she spends the rest of the session instructing him on her philosophy of life, with such cardinal lessons as "you have to make the best with what you've got" and "I wake up every morning determined to whoop it up." David is always very affirming of Marge as a person and each visit in a sense becomes a celebration of her persona and distinctive point of view.

Dementia has wiped away Marge's memory and certain other capabilities (such as reading and writing), and she is acutely aware of these losses. She nevertheless remains incredibly social, but she lacks confidence in her ability to interact and is fearful of not making sense. So she ends up either holding back or doing a kind of "performance" where she is the star and the center of attention. But in most instances she avoids trying to make conversation because she knows she will inevitably confuse the person with whom she is speaking or become confused herself

This doesn't mean that the Marge whom we all have known and loved is gone or out of reach. Marge-the-person is still very much with us but laboring under a heavy burden and facing up to some very daunting challenges. It's this Marge that David the neurologist connects with so strongly. And when that connection is made Marge feels like a million dollars.

By odd coincidence en route to visit Dr. Coffey last December I came across a program on the radio about-of all things-dementia. It was a panel discussion-type format and the panelists were making the point that although dementia certainly involves loss, it is more fundamentally about change-and that the family and friends of someone with dementia need to adapt to this change by creating new ways to interact because the old ways simply won't work.

One of the panelists runs a theater group and leads improvisation sessions for people with dementia. When she gives participants an imaginary situation or a character in the present as a starting point, they are able to do creative and interesting work, much like anyone else. Her point was that people who live with dementia inhabit a world that is forever new.

That's true of my mother for sure and certain. She lives in an eternal present, and Bob and I have become adept at meeting her there. She's always thinking, she's always got a point, she's always making sense, but you have to jump into her world with both feet in order to have any idea what she's talking about. (I have to admit that sometimes we don't have a clue, but that's ok too.) And whatever is happening, no matter how good or how bad, exists in the moment and then vanishes without a trace. The pleasure or pain of an experience is as real and as strong as ever, but then it's gone. My apologies for going off on what feels like a lecture, but I want you to know how things are for Marge, and her dementia is an issue that I am constantly struggling to understand. I suppose the bottom line is that she's struggling but relatively stable and leads a circumscribed but interesting life. As she puts it, "It's always mixed up. You don't know who you are or where you are or why." That said, here are some other recent Marge-isms:

The landscape constantly amazes her and on a particularly lovely summer afternoon while driving along an exceptionally gorgeous stretch of road she wondered aloud how she'd ended up in the most beautiful place in the world. Another time I had an envelope handy: "This place has more beauty in it than any place around. The way things are put together, it's amazing." Or yet again, a favorite expression: "Joyous!"

She will often ask me how old she is, and when I reply that she's 91 she'll marvel that she could possibly be that old. She'll then ask my age, and when I tell her I'm 57, she usually replies that I'm "only a baby." On one recent occasion, however, her response was an unaccustomed "oh!" I was curious to figure out what she meant by that, so after a period of silence I asked if 57 seemed old to her. She turned, looked at me lovingly, and said, "I don't think of you as anything other than yourself."

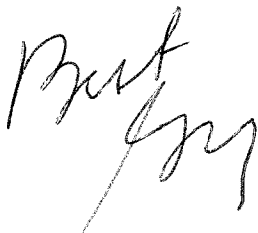
And finally, we share meals with her here at home two or three times a week, which is always a pleasure for her because the house is full of stuff-much of it hers-and there's so much to see. Her usual refrain is that "this is my kind of living." But she's a girl for a party and lately when we set the table for three she's visibly disappointed and wonders, "Where are the rest of them?"

This is the up side, but things this past year have not all been rosy. What began as a cold in early October became a bronchial infection that threatened pneumonia and later precipitated periods of extreme dizziness. All of this taxed Marge's slender reserve of energy and for a while she ended up in a wheelchair barely able to hold up her own head. As the respiratory infection abated-over a matter of months-the dizziness persisted, and she began to fall repeatedly. She was black and blue ALL OVER, but mercifully didn't break a thing. Just as I was becoming hugely alarmed, all of the symptoms ended and she was back to her old self. That's because she's strong as horse and aside from being old she's in nearly perfect health. A curious mix of fragile and tough.

So the flow of life goes on and Marge's 92nd birthday is fast approaching. We consider it such a gift that she's still present in our lives at a time when we can really appreciate her. Then there's Bob's mother who is approaching 95 and our four daughters who range from 19 to 29 and everything else that's going on in our lives. But that, as they say, is another story.

We've enjoyed hearing from many of you over the course of the year, and encourage you to stay in touch. I read your cards and notes aloud to Marge and we pour over the pictures you send together. In fact, we often peruse your messages more than once, always with equal enjoyment.

That's it for now. Greetings and best wishes for the challenges and pleasures of the year ahead. All is well on our end.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Bob" followed by a stylized flourish.