

**AWC SPRING 2008 WRITER'S CONTEST
WINNING SUBMISSIONS – SPIRITUAL/RELIGIOUS/SELF-HELP**

FIRST PLACE: A Tale of Two Biddies - Kathleen Gizzi

“Remember Ethan, we have to be very quiet in here. No talking, no climbing, no banging the kneeler, no dropping the missalette on the pew in front of us and no fighting with your sister. Okay?”

“Ethan, do you understand?” I repeat.

“Yea, yea, yea...”

It is Wednesday, 10:00 a.m., my assigned hour to act as a guardian for the Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. I am concerned today for my fellow guardians, who come here to pray, to adore and to enjoy the peace and tranquility. Maybe my five-year-old will surprise me. Maybe he will be “good” and sit relatively still for an hour. Maybe pigs will sprout wings and fly.

“I want to hold the door,” Ethan whines as we enter the chapel.

“Hannah, let your brother hold the door, please,” I whisper softly.

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“But I was holding it first,” she whispers louder.

“How about if you hold the door on the way out, sweetheart?” I say through my clenched-toothed smile.

The morning sun breaks through the stained-glass windows, scattering shards of reds, blues and yellows onto the pews and floor below. The three-dimensional Stations of the Cross replay an agonizing yet inspiring slide show along the walls. The sacristy lamp, eternally lit, signals to all that enter that this is a Catholic church. The golden sunburst Monstrance containing the Holy Eucharist sits prominently on the altar, like a rare gift displayed for all to come and behold.

I choose to sit in the back of the church, close to the exit in case a quick getaway is necessary.

“I want to sit in the middle,” Ethan announces as we stumble our way into the pew. He is on the end.

“Hannah, can you please switch seats with Ethan.”

“But I was here first.”

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“Honey, you’re five years older than he is. P-l-e-a-s-e!”

Hair tossed in obvious disgust, “Fine, but you let him have whatever he wants, Mom. Really, you do.”

“Sweet pea, can we argue about my unfair parenting later?”

As we play musical seats, an elderly woman, not one of our usual guardians, selects the pew in front of us. “There is an entire chapel full of empty pews. Why, sweet Jesus, must she choose this one?” I contemplate switching pews, but recalling the angst I endured to get settled in this one, I quickly change my mind.

I am well aware that older people have only slight tolerance for little ones who are not directly related to them. They forget what its like to try and keep an active five-year-old reasonably quiet for an entire hour. I could have stayed home, but this is my assigned hour. I am not going to renege on my duty just because the kids have another teacher workday off.

The kneeler bounces off the floor. “Sorry Mom.” Ethan says sheepishly.

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Any minute now, the old lady in front of us is going to turn around and give me a piece of her mind. *Please let her be hard of hearing*, I pray.

“I’m hungry. Did you bring any snacks?” Ethan begs.

“No, but if you’re a really good boy, I’ll take you to Chick-Fil-A for lunch when we’re done.”

Two and a half minutes pass.

“Can we go now?” Ethan says now tugging on my sleeve.

“Not yet, just a little longer,” I assure him.

“Yeah, like forty-five minutes,” Hannah chimes in.

“Forty-five,” Ethan moans loudly.

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I know what this woman is thinking. “She shouldn’t bring her children here if she can’t keep them under control. A good spanking is all the little one needs. In my day, children were meant to be seen and not heard.”

“Come on lady, I’m doing my best.” I reply to her thought bubble. “I know they’re not perfect, but they’re good kids. Really.”

“Mom, Hannah stuck her tongue out at me,” Ethan says, using his outdoor voice.

“I’m sure she was just checking to see how long it was,” I say while darting a knowing glance at Hannah. “Ethan, why don’t you draw a picture of Jesus?”

“I’m done,” he says, proudly handing me his penciled rendition of Jesus on the cross...a large-headed stick figure with a smiley face, affixed to a plus sign.

“I’m sure Jesus would like that very much.”

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“Mom, Ethan is pinching my legs.”

“Ethan, come out from under there,” I say, secretly admiring how he has managed to position himself under the pew – close enough to launch a sneak attack, but with room to recoil when Hannah’s hand reaches under the pew to grab him.

“Mom, I’m not pinching her, I’m just tickling her. Besides, she likes it.”

Surely the old biddy in front of us is ready to burst. It must be killing her not to turn around and throw me the evil eye. And then, without warning, the frail little white-haired woman rises shakily to her feet. She shuffles to the end of her pew.

“Now we’ve done it,” I say to myself. “She’s had enough.” I know her kind. She won’t go without saying her peace. I hold my breath. As she ambles past our pew and rounds the corner, I exhale just slightly. She uses the back of our pew to steady herself as she heads toward the exit. Just as I am about to sound the “all clear”, she leans over into my ear and whispers “I just want to tell you something.”

I brace myself. I’ve earned this. I saw it coming. I grimace and turn around to face the inevitable.

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“I just want to tell you what a beautiful family you have. You are very blessed.”

I study her face, which is much softer than I had imagined from behind. I extend my hands to meet hers, which are already outstretched. As I look into her far-reaching blue eyes, I can see that she is in fact sincere and not just setting me up for a verbal lashing. “Thank you” is all I can manage and I reluctantly let go of her warm, knowing hands.

I sit there in silence for a moment, trying to process the turn of events that just transpired. In my youth and haste, I crafted an image of a woman I knew nothing about and turned her into a villain. She, on the other hand, offered me only kind words and a loving gesture. Despite my negative thoughts, I failed to transform her into the crotchety old woman I imagined. Yet her understanding transformed me into a mother who was trying her best instead of one who was failing miserably. I had judged and she had not. Which of us was the old biddy after all?

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SECOND PLACE: How I Found My Rhythm in Retirement - Rosemary Brittain

When I first told my family about my retirement plans, they didn't believe me. After all, they knew I had inherited the workaholic gene from both my parents. And I was young in their eyes – only 58 at the time. “What will you do with yourself if I you don't work?” they asked collectively. “There are lots of things I can do besides work,” I countered. But, to my surprise, I could not think of a single one. My career had consumed my life and left me little time to develop hobbies or pursue interests outside of work. I had been in the workforce for almost forty years, and I decided it was time to do something else.

The truth is I had planned to retire at sixty-five, but the arrival of my new department head triggered my decision to retire early. He was a decade younger and more of a workaholic than I. He expected me to prove myself after having run the department well for the past four years with little input from my previous boss. He went so far as to invite an outside consultant to evaluate the state of the department and offer recommendations for improvement. As a result, he charged me with decentralizing some of our operations, which I had wanted to do for some time anyway. For the first nine months of his tenure, I found myself working seventy-hour weeks during the restructuring process. Although the outcome was positive, I knew I did not want to continue working this hard and at this pace. I had “been there, done that” and didn't want to go there again.

So, I set about developing a plan. I was very methodical about it, as I am with most things. I told my boss I wanted to retire early and, initially, he was unhappy about my decision. He eventually came around, especially after I offered to groom my successor.

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Together, we identified a bright, talented young woman who was perfect for the role. I set up periodic meetings with my financial planner to make sure I would not run out of money before I ran out of life. I started to think about things that could fill my leisure time, but other than landscape photography, I was coming up blank.

With less than a year to retirement, I started feeling anxious and began to question my decision to retire early. My transition plan at work was going well, almost too well, and I was beginning to feel like the ex-wife. Despite my boss's initial reluctance to accept my resignation, within a short time he involved me less in the operations of my department and involved my named successor more. This development surprised me and help fuel my anxiety. Over the next several months, I went through the motions, but my heart was no longer in my career. My transition was beginning to feel like a kick to the curb rather than the voluntary retirement that it was. I thought by spending less time at work, I would have the time and energy to begin pursuing other interests. My boss accepted my proposal to reduce my workweek to four days, and with six months left on the job, I began my search for life after retirement. The problem was I didn't know how to begin the search.

I had heard about life coaches, but did not know much about the services they offered. When a sympathetic colleague told me about Dr. Connie Ward, a psychologist in private practice, I agreed to meet her. As I entered her small, nicely furnished office, I was a little apprehensive. I need not have been. She was warm and friendly, and I liked her immediately. During our sessions over the next several months, I learned that retirement is not just about the finances, but about the emotions triggered by such a major life change. It requires careful thought and planning, especially for a workaholic like me. We talked about

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the feelings of loss I was experiencing, and she assured me this was normal. She told me I needed to find things that challenged and fulfilled me other than work. She recognized the workaholic gene in me right away and knew I was not one to “go with the flow.”

“Be sure to build some structure into your retirement life,” she admonished more than once.

As I neared my departure date, Dr. Ward instructed me to make a list of all the things I had always wanted to do but had never found the time. She also suggested I add things to the list that seemed interesting to me, but that I had never thought much about. The list grew longer and longer. Then she recommended I start trying some of the things on my day off and on weekends and evenings. But, I as much as I intended to do so, I didn't follow through. I was still working four days a week after all, and I felt obligated to be productive. It was only when I was within a month of retirement that I started to get serious about implementing the plans that Dr. Ward and I had so meticulously formulated.

Despite my best efforts, however, nine months into retirement I was still floundering. Where had the time gone? Why hadn't I found my “rhythm?” I had taken a cruise to the Caribbean, traveled to California, Texas, North Carolina, and New York to visit family and friends, but I was tired of traveling now. I had spent a great deal of time with Jay (the love of my life), but he was growing weary of trying to keep me entertained and happy. He had a life, and he needed to get back to it. I participated in a few volunteer projects but nothing had created any passion in me. I had put out some feelers for consulting jobs but, so far, none had materialized. I had spent time taking landscape photographs (a hobby I usually

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enjoy) but grew bored with it after a while. I had no structure to my days, and I was starting to feel afloat and anxious.

“I need to work,” I told myself.

I was almost at the point of applying for jobs at my former employer, but the thought of getting back into the long commutes and daily stresses of a job left me cold. I thought about the structure Dr. Ward had encouraged me to build into my days. I dug out my ‘retirement bliss’ list and scanned it for something interesting -- Yoga. I rejoined my local gym and signed up for twice-weekly Yoga classes, and I loved them. But, I still needed something to feel productive and useful.

As I was sharing my dilemma with a friend one day, she suggested I look into substitute teaching. I decided to apply to my local school district as a substitute teacher and, to my delight, I was accepted immediately. I have been teaching K-12 classes two to three days per week and find it very rewarding. I enjoy it so much that I have applied for a part-time teaching position in the school system’s adult education program as well.

It was not until I’d had a serious fight with Jay that I started writing. I was in Texas helping to care for my elderly mother, and Jay and I had decided to take a break from each other for awhile. I was feeling lonesome and out of sorts and didn’t know what to do with myself. I had been toying with the idea of writing a book about the difficulty a high powered executive was having transitioning into retirement and how she finally finds her rhythm. The story started pouring out of me during the three weeks I was in Texas, and I continued with it when I returned home to Atlanta.

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I joined the Atlanta Writers Club, signed up for writing classes at my local college, and started writing articles and short stories between working on my book. I'd kept a journal off and on and did a great deal of technical writing during my career, but I never thought of myself as a writer. I have found it to be therapeutic and relaxing, and I feel productive and fulfilled. So, now I write almost every day, enter contests, and submit articles for publication regularly.

Adjusting to retirement has been a long and slow process and more difficult than I had anticipated. Dr. Ward and my friends were helpful along the way. But, ultimately, I had to discover what brings me satisfaction and keeps me challenged and fulfilled. For me, it is a combination of structure and variety. Now, I teach part time, write almost daily, take writing and fitness classes regularly, participate in a couple of book clubs, spend time with friends and family, travel, participate in volunteer work, and get out and take landscape photographs whenever the mood hits me. And that's how I redirected my workaholic gene and found my rhythm in retirement.

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THIRD PLACE: The Visitation - Jill Jennings

It was while we were washing the car, great sheets of water running down the concrete driveway, that she came. Pecking and then wiggling her neck so that the water could go down, getting her orange three-spoked feet drenched, the creature reminded me of a child chug-a-lugging Mountain Dew on a 101 degree day. She was hopping from one foot to the other, as if to keep from burning her feet on the melted asphalt. But she was a bird. A white bird. A dove. And she was out in my front yard.

Slammed car doors didn't seem to frighten her, nor did 6-foot tall humans wielding water hoses. She was thirsty. I could tell because she kept following my husband around; he was in control of the water output. Since she kept pecking, even where the driveway was dry, we decided she was hungry. I spilled a handful of birdseed on the corner of the drive, very slowly and carefully. She didn't leave. She ate. In fact, she ate every single seed we gave her. Then she drew her feet up into herself, the way a plane does at lift-off, and closed her eyes. I think she was actually taking a nap.

“She's not scared of you, you know. She's someone's pet. See the red tag on her left leg?” he said as he squirted some more Armor-all on the steering wheel.

“Who keeps a white dove? The CIA? The Taliban? The French Foreign Legion? And why has she landed here, in our driveway, in Woodstock, Georgia, this particular day?” That's what I wanted to know.

She woke up. We give her more birdseed. In return, she let me walk right up to her, though she opened her eyes wide and blinked at me several times. I stood still. She swiveled her head

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around 360 degrees, then stopped. I swear she looked me right in the eye. Who are you, I wanted to ask, but I kept my silence. We both kept

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staring. Our Mexican standoff lasted but a few seconds, but it seems like an hour to me. My heart was pounding. If ever there was a bird that could look at someone with meaning, it was this one. She resumed eating, then sat down again and drew her feet up. I didn't want to bother her, so I went back in the house to wait for her to finish her second nap. I couldn't stand the suspense: I went back to watch her some more. This time she looked like she was trying out her sea legs, hopping beside the juniper bushes on the edge of the driveway as if she's never hopped before, or as if she just got her foot out of a cast. She acted relaxed, even bored.

“She's not afraid of us. She'll be there when you come back out.” So said the man wiping down the windshield. I decided to go back inside.

I have never seen a white dove before. Only in pictures, usually in paintings, or stained glass windows in churches, have I seen them, and always with wings spread wide open. Often they are pictured flying nose down. I've never seen one hopping around in birdseed, saying nothing, eating at a leisurely pace on a street or driveway in the suburbs. Of all the pigeons in all the cities of the world, how many are white? How many are as big as she is, and how many move with her slow precision? No jerky, nervous gestures, no flying in my face, no bird crap on my shoes or shoulders, not from her. No, this bird appears to be a different species entirely.

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It's almost as if she used to be a person, but got caught in a fairy tale, and a magician turned her into a white dove. Not knowing how the story goes, I can't guess why she's here. Was she given three tasks to carry out before she can come back in human form? Was one of them: "Go to a house in the suburbs of Atlanta and eat two meals there, then

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take a nap? If a human touches you, you're stuck forever as a bird." But if that were the case, why was she so approachable?

I don't know what the rules are. Maybe I was supposed to touch her. Maybe I was supposed to speak to her. If I had, would she have answered me, perhaps in a human voice? I bet she would have asked me to help her get changed back to whoever she was before.

Perhaps she wasn't really human, although she certainly acted like a person. It could be that she was sent as a sign, though of what, I don't know. I looked up "dove," as a symbol. Here's what it said: *faithfulness, gentleness, peace, innocence, and being a homebody*. My Chinese mother-in-law called me up and told that seeing a white dove is very important. She said it brings good luck, and that all my problems will soon disappear.

In the Bible, there are many references to doves. In the gospels, right after Jesus gets baptized, the Spirit of God descends upon him in the form of a white dove, lights on his very person, and then we hear a voice from above. "This is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased."

Assuming for the sake of argument that the spirit of God came to me over the weekend, what is He trying to say to me? Notice, I didn't get the booming voice to clarify the situation. Give

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me a hint, God, I mean, Holy Spirit. What are you getting at here? Or do you want me to figure it out by myself?

There's also the Pentecost episode, in which the disciples were convened together in the upper room, when the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove descended upon them. Then

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came the tongues of fire and the cacophony of many languages. This episode is commonly thought to mean that the Holy Spirit gave understanding to all these men, because they could comprehend languages they had never learned. All were one in their understanding. In stead of different languages dividing men, they drew them together. This incident can be interpreted further, but I'll stop right here. Still, I can't forget that it is a few weeks before Pentecost. Is this a coincidence?

If a white dove, huge as this one, had visited a Roman of the first century bce, he would have been as amazed as I am. Most likely he would have hired the services of an augur, a priest whose sole job was to interpret the movements of birds, the patterns they make in flight, where they flew, who they visited, etc, and then to tell the client what it all means. Weddings were often postponed the morning of the nuptials simply because of the movements of birds in the sky. No one wanted to get married on an unlucky day! You could have a lifetime of misery if you did that! So what's a little wasted food from the reception? Wait until a lucky day, one with birds that have flown in favorable patterns. That's how highly the Romans regarded birds.

I admit I don't know why the dove came, what she wanted, or why she left. I thought at the time that she might adopt us, as have so many other birds in our backyard, but she came to the

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front yard only. When I went outside at dusk to look at her again, she'd disappeared. I never did get to see her fly away, her wings unfurled toward the sun. But then we never saw her when she first landed in our driveway either. It was almost as if she just materialized out of nothing and appeared on the concrete. The whole time she was with us, she never made a sound.

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You can say this incident doesn't mean anything. You may be right. Call me superstitious, but I prefer to think otherwise. On April 22, 2007, a huge white dove appeared on our driveway and visited us for several hours. She came for a reason. What that reason is, I don't know now, but I believe the future may reveal it to me. But only if I allow myself to be open to that possibility.

Unexplained events happen all the time. Most people who observe these events discount them completely because they cannot explain them logically. Unfortunately, doing that has the effect of severely limiting one's perspective of the possible. It constitutes a conscious choice NOT to see the wonder all around us. It keeps the mind and soul closed to new possibilities.

So for now, here's what I've decided the white dove means: openness to new possibilities. All I have to do is wait for them. Keep an open mind, an open soul, be patient, and wait.