

At the Time      by Margie McGinnis

It takes many years to yield the fruit of our life's experiences. Each significant happening attaches to the previous one like the bark of a tree. This layering provides stability while our roots grow deeply. Soil, sun, and water nourish the body; the learning process feeds the intellect. This enables us, by design, to bear fruit; however, it is only the new growth on the branch that produces the flower.

Sixty years ago, I wrote an essay for a short-story reading assignment. Why did the author name the story "Bittersweet"? An A grade was expected; I settled for a C. The teacher said, "Your interpretation makes no sense at all." At the time, that learning experience was most significant as it prepared me for the ones to follow.

In high school, pre-med students were advised to take Latin. I wanted to be a doctor but settled for nursing instead. Four years later, SAT scores assured me of a four-year nursing scholarship. My Latin teacher said if I worked hard enough, I could be a Rhodes Scholar. She was disappointed when I returned the entrance form, unfilled, refusing the opportunity to further my education. At the senior awards ceremony, I received the second-place ribbon for scholastic achievement in Latin. Perceiving the disappointment I felt, she said that I was tied with the first-place medal winner (straight A's for four years), but she was going to Wheaton College and I was not. Father is mentally ill, and mother cleans houses to feed a family of seven. She said I needed to go out and get a job, work hard and become a secretary. And that's what I did for a total of 24 years.

At age 50, I registered for English 101 at Tri-C. A full-time job, husband, children—I could handle it. I was going to be a nurse. English composition, anatomy and physiology, microbiology, psychology—straight A’s; hands-on chemistry labs—straight B’s.

Seven years later, I started a two-year clinical nursing program at LCCC. Being the oldest in the class had its advantages. The elderly patients loved me and said, “You are an angel, aren’t you?” They really thought I was an angel. To my surprise, I started believing it myself. This encouraged me to major in Angelology. A smile and touch of the hand, words of comfort and caring, and loving, unconditionally, that’s what angels do. Well, maybe, with a few conditions. The instructors caught on and assigned me all the old, cranky, hard-to-please patients.

Angels thrive in spirituality, but take one out of her environment and she starts metamorphosing. Giving shots, enemas, starting I’Vs, catheterizing--did you say you want me to draw blood? It must be Halloween; I’m spooked! Angels are funny; they make us laugh. Every time a machine clicks, beeps or buzzes, they jump and run. And they can’t follow instructions.

“I told you to complete her discharge papers, not to feed her. We don’t keep ambulance drivers waiting.”

“But, she was hungry.”

“Did you eat your lunch?”

“No!”

“Are you late for class?”

“Yes!”

My instructor shook her head and pointed her finger at me. “Listen, my dear,” then she paused, hugged me, and whispered in my ear “Someday, you will be a great nurse.” The most significant experience—no; the nicest, definitely.

Upon graduating, I flew to The Hattie Larlham Foundation. Angels everywhere; I should have known. My first patient was four years old and paralyzed from the chest down. She smiled. I said “You are an angel, aren’t you?” There was no need to ask; I knew she was.

Sometimes nurses weep. What can one say to a young mother with multiple cancerous brain tumors when she says “Jesus heard my prayers; he sent me an angel.” Patients weep, too. I handed a rose to a dying woman. She said, “Saint Theresa gave you this rose, just for me, didn’t she?” Every time it rains--not pennies, but a shower of roses from heaven. One can’t deny it; no words are spoken.

Angels bloom and bear fruit: the meaning of hope, trust, and prayer. They acknowledge an ever-loving God who continually offers life in new growth. I chose to bud once again and registered for Basic Computer class. Hands-on tasks—“Why is everyone’s banana in the trash can but mine?” Just my luck—I got a temperamental banana! Up goes the hand, again, “Mrs. Christie, what did you say?” She said to delete the document, not the whole recycle bin. Did someone snicker? Doesn’t anyone realize I’m an angel out of my realm?” Any ways, why should I care if this machine with the TV-screen face and the typewriter body acts like a two-year-old? It thinks I’m funny. Pop goes the weasel—it beeps and I jump. Was computer class most significant? No, but I think it may be the start of something good. I’m beginning to kind of like my computer, and I think it likes me too. We may become good friends. I tell it all my thoughts and it writes them down, unconditionally. So it has a few conditions—that’s OK.

Each learning experience becomes part of the one before. Take one stage away and we are incomplete. Gestalt psychology regards learning as resulting from insight, defined as a process or reorganization rather than from association or trial and error.

At this time, in reflection, I realize that writing this paper is my most significant learning experience. I now know that I have acquired the ability to choose life and live it abundantly. Never be less than you are; always strive to be more. How? Take the newly offered path—the narrow one—designed by God, just for you.

Where am I going? I don't know, but I am certain that one day I will fall asleep and awake to the touch of a hand, a smile, and say "I know you are an angel, aren't you?"

