

December 18, 2017



Merry Christmas from Marion Station.

This April will mark sixteen years that we've lived in this old Victorian haunted house on the rural Eastern Shore of the Chesapeake Bay. I never thought we'd stay here this long. In fact, this is the longest I've ever lived in any one place... and I'm itchy to move on sometimes, but things never move in that direction. So, we stay. I guess this old house chooses to hold on to us for now. It's home, and it's a great house at Christmas with many happy memories here.

There's a wall in our kitchen where I started tracking the growth of the grandchildren years ago. Every Christmas and every summer when they come to visit, we stand them up against that wall and mark their height with a Sharpie. We write their names and the date right on the wall. It's the Wall of Fame. The lowest mark is about 20 inches off the floor – marked "Tristan - December 27, 2010." He was just three weeks old, and I snapped a picture of his daddy holding him up against that wall – tiny feet on the floor and his mama balancing the Sharpie on his wobbly head to mark his first debut on the Wall of Fame. And there they all are ... climbing up the wall – Connor, Mia, Gracie, Anabelle, Tate, Bailea and little Primrose. The tallest mark on the Wall is still Benjamin at 6 feet, one inch – he was nineteen when we took that measure. Ben the oldest and the tallest of our grandchildren. And my heart jumps a little as I type his name because he's somewhere in Baghdad right now, serving his country. He'll be there until May 2018. We worry so about him.

I tell Dan that if we ever do move, he will have to cut the Wall of Fame right out of the kitchen and take it with us wherever we go. I couldn't imagine not looking at every day... or leaving it behind ... or worse – painting over it.

All of the kids and grandkids are doing well. Lara and David just bought a new house and I visited the weekend they moved. While I was there I bought Primrose (age three) a stuffed animal – "My Dream Kitten." It purrs and moves just like a real, live animal. As she opened it,

Primmie said, "I'm so excited. I can't believe you got me this. This is the best day my life." Ahhh... life is so wonderful when they're this easy to please.

I thought about that later and considered what the best day of my life was. I couldn't pick one, but several came to mind... the days that I held each of my children for the first time, the day I nailed it singing Luzzi's "Ave Maria" at my grandmother's funeral (Oy, the stress leading up to that moment!), the day I saw Mother Teresa. They were all great days. Then there was the day I married Dan Burgoyne in an oak grove holding a gorgeous bouquet that he made using dahlias from my garden ... with my choir singing and the Dunloggin Pipe Band marching across the grove, and my husband crying as he recited his vows, and him placing that wedding band on my finger - a band designed with Celtic knots and the head of a Great Blue Heron - and everyone looking up at the sun dog (rainbow) that appeared in the sky just as the ceremony ended - that was a really good day. Probably my best day.

As you get older "best days" cluster into "best times." Our best times happen when we travel. This year Dan and I shared a wonderful ten days in Scotland. It was the first tour group I took to Scotland and most of the group (24 people) were guests from past tours. We traced a path along the border from Lindisfarne to Iona with jaunts up into the Highlands and the Kilmartin Valley where there are over 300 ancient monuments - the largest collection of Neolithic and Bronze Age remains in Scotland. I placed my foot in the imprint carved into the inauguration stone atop Dunnad Fort, believed to be the ancient capital of the Dál Riata. It's the same place where the first Scottish kings placed their feet when they were crowned. We walked past standing stones, hiked in the hills of Glencoe, stood in the ruins of Melrose Abbey, toured Rosslyn Chapel, listened to the echoes at Linlithgow Palace and climbed into the tomb at Cairnpapple Hill.

To state that Scotland is magical sounds so trite - like a travel advertisement. But, my friends.... Scotland IS magical. It seems that there is a castle on every hillside, a story for every island, river, mountain and field. It is the land of stories. A harsh land, a wild land and a land that vibrates with spiritual energy. We're going again in May for any of you that want to come along. Just let me know.

We visited the Fairy Knowe on Doon Hill where Robert Kirk, the first person to ever write a book on the language of the fairies communed with them on a regular basis. His book was published in 1689. It recounted Kirk's conversations with the elementals on this hill and his understanding of a kind of extra sensory perception the Scottish Highlanders had at the time. Kirk, who was also the local minister was known to wander about Doon Hill at night. He was found dead at the top of the hill clad in his nightshirt. He evidently died during one of his night walks. Though his grave is in the nearby churchyard, many don't think Robert Kirk's body is in that grave. Some locals still believe that his body was taken by the fairies. Apparently, Kirk was encountered in several places after his death where he told people that the fairies had taken him. There's a local legend that states Robert Kirk became chaplain to the Fairy Queen and still roams Doon Hill ... at night. There's no mention of whether or not he's still wearing that nightshirt.

The image on the front of the card is of the Spanish Chestnuts on Inchmahome, an island named for a thirteenth century monastery. Except for the priory ruins, the island is covered with old trees and paths winding through the woodland. When I was there in May, the entire woodland floor was covered with bluebells. One can't help but feel "otherworldly" when walking through that blue carpet of flowers under a canopy of ancient trees. The trees on this Christmas card, are estimated to be between four and five hundred years old. The island was once a refuge for little Mary Queen of Scots when her mother, Marie de Guise was trying to keep her safe. Mary was just five years old when she came to Inchmahome, and some say that she actually planted these Spanish Chestnuts and played in a bower of boxwoods that still exists. The island was her refuge.

It's hard to describe a "thin place" or a magical spot or a spiritual destination. Language seems to fail us when try to put such powerful feelings into words. But I can say one thing - being in the presence of those Spanish Chestnuts conjures a sense of being fully present in the moment - that particular moment in time. There is no past... no future whilst standing there. There is only now - who I am in that space, in that moment.

Sometimes we forget that the present moment is all we have. Our nature is to look to the future and reflect on the past and live in the tension between. That flurry of back and forth focus clouds our sense of the here and now. The "here and now" is all that matters - and the here and now screams out beneath the Spanish Chestnuts on Inchmahome. It can be scary. Christmas is all about the focus on the here and now. Though we plan for months - the culmination of planning reaches its climax on that one day when people everywhere recall - and celebrate everything they've ever loved. Our mindset is magnified ... gratitude and happiness, as well as worry, loneliness, and sadness. All of those feelings are bigger at Christmas.

I asked my 34-year-old daughter Lara, "What was your best Christmas ever?" She thought just a few seconds and said, "The Christmas when we got the dog." Wow. I remembered that Christmas differently. It was one of the saddest for me. I had been widowed that year. My kids were 14, 12 and 8. This was our first Christmas alone. One of the kids mentioned something earlier in the year about wanting a dog and I blew it off. Then at Christmas it seemed like something that might spark some joy with them. So, I got on the phone and found a Chesapeake Bay Retriever puppy ready for adoption 2 hours away. I shared my intentions of getting the puppy with my oldest son, Dominic. I'd leave the house at 4am on Christmas Eve morning to go get that puppy. I'd be home by 8am and if Danny and Lara woke up before I got back, Dominic was to tell them that I'd be home shortly and to keep them in the family room where I'd enter with the puppy.

When I walked in the door that morning holding that little brown ball of fur, the kids were ecstatic... so happy at the end of a year full of sadness. We played with "Jack the dog" all day until I had to leave to direct the music at the Christmas Eve masses. The kids went to stay with relatives for the night and I was due to pick them up on Christmas morning. So, after Midnight Mass, I came home to empty house and a very sad and lonely puppy missing his Mama. The dog and I shared a few troubles and then we cried together all night. There were a few more lonely tears on Christmas morning, but once the kids came home, it was all joy again... for them.

I tried to think of what my best Christmas ever was. I really loved that Christmas that my brother Ricky gave me the "Meet the Beatles" album. I think I was six. I played that thing to death. But my best Christmas was when Dan Burgoyne made me concrete garden stepping stones with a mosaic of pottery shards pressed into them. We'd found those shards on our honeymoon on a beach at Lindisfarne on the North Sea. We didn't have much money that Christmas, and had decided not to get each other gifts. But Dan found a way to give a gift that cost nothing – but gave so much – a physical commemoration of a perfect moment in time – and that special love that we continue to share.

I asked Dan and my sons, "What was your best Christmas ever?" None of them had an answer. Finally, when I pressed him, Dan said last Christmas was pretty good when he got all of that stuff for his bees (he's a beekeeper). I said, "Out of your whole life – that's your BEST Christmas? Seriously?" He replied that men aren't that deep and I should stop asking dumb questions.

I've concluded that the best Christmases happen when we feel loved and a sense of belonging. The gifts and celebration magnify that and make us feel it even stronger. And conversely, when we feel sad or lonely at Christmas, the gifts and celebration rituals tend to amplify our sorrow. It's during those dark times that we should try and remember that it's just a "moment in time" and once we get through it, things will get better. Christmas reminds us that hope in and of itself is a gift – a gift that we should embrace when we're down and give to others when we're joyful.

Wherever you are at this moment in time, Dan and I wish you the best Christmas ever. And if for some reason, this can't be your best Christmas ever, we wish you hope and the understanding that things do get better - no matter how dark times seem. That's the Christmas story after all... a new baby, born on the darkest night without clothes or place to lay his little head, forced to bunk with animals in a barn ... born to parents who were running for their lives. Despite his humble start, the baby grows up and shows us that death isn't the end, that we will be with our departed loved ones again, that our pain will end and every tear will be wiped away. The gift of the baby tells us that we are deeply loved – and that no darkness can overcome the light cast by that eternal love. And whether or not you are Christian, that's a powerful message worth contemplation – that true love has the ability to extinguish the darkness, deliver hope and create a sense of belonging that heals mind, the body and the spirit.

We wish joy, peace and love this Christmas – May God bless you and those whom you love.

A handwritten signature in purple ink that reads "Mindie".

*This Christmas letter is read out loud by Mindie with accompanying photos on the Travel Hag YouTube Channel*

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sum\\_9uZQZz4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sum_9uZQZz4)