

December 18, 2018



Merry Christmas from Marion Station. As December moves along, and 2018 becomes a memory, Dan and I feel grateful. We're grateful for our children and grandchildren, our home, our ability to make a living and have nice things. But we are especially grateful for you - our friends and family. It's been a difficult year for us, and your friendship inspires us to keep moving forward, living in the moment and counting our blessings every day.

There have been bright spots in this year. The tour companies, Chesapeake Ghosts and Thin Places Tours are both doing very well. I've turned over most of the ghost tour company duties to Lara (my daughter) and she's made all the difference in 2018 being our biggest year ever. Grandson #1, Benjamin is finally home safe from his last deployment in Iraq and he's gotten engaged. He's so happy. All the kids and grandkids are well and they bring us such happiness.

This week Lara and her little girl, Primrose - who is almost 5 - and I will do our annual trip to Washington DC. We'll stay at the old Willard Hotel next to the White House in a room that overlooks the National Christmas tree. This year we're taking Primmie to see the Washington Ballet perform the Nutcracker. My sister, Kathy is joining us with her daughters and granddaughter for Tea at the Willard and a visit Mount Vernon - George and Martha Washington's house on the Potomac River. Every year at Christmas, Mount Vernon brings in a live camel reminiscent of the one old George brought to the estate to entertain his friends and family one Christmas. We'll have breakfast at the Hay Adams Hotel, dinner at Hamilton's and shop at the Holiday Markets. The glitz of lighted trees, decorated federal buildings and shop windows bring Christmas into immediate focus for me. They ignite a sense of nostalgia, memories of my mother taking me downtown to see the shop windows at Woodward and Lothrop and the live nativity - with real reindeer - on the White House lawn. Those were good times. And taking Lara and Primmie into the same city center at Christmas continues that tradition and somehow extends the old memories for me.

Sometimes though, the Christmas spirit makes life's challenges seem a little more burdensome. In April we got some difficult news. The inoperable brain aneurysm that Dan has sitting on his brain stem has doubled in size over the last 3 years. It's starting to cause him double vision, headaches and issues with balance. The only treatment is to slow the growth by keeping the blood pressure under control. Right now, Dan handles the effects of the aneurysm pretty well. But it's tough dealing with the mobility issues and the uncertainty of a serious condition that can't be cured.

My Scotland tour came right after that diagnosis. Dan flew out to California to visit Al and Ruthie and the girls, while I made my way across the Atlantic to meet a wonderful group of people in Edinburgh. For ten days I led them on an exploration of Scotland's thin places. As always, being with tour guests lifted my spirits, and that cheer was magnified by being present in the wild landscapes of Scotland. The tour included a stop on Iona – a little island in the Inner Hebrides made famous by an Irish monk named Columba who settled there in the sixth century and developed a monastic community that became one of the greatest schools of learning in history. The Book of Kells was created in the Iona Scriptorium, and the spirituality brought by the monks in 563 A.D. is still present there, carrying on the traditions of faith, love, teaching, good works and prayer. You can't help but feel spiritual on Iona, and there is such a healing energy about the place.

We also went to Lindisfarne – aka "Holy Island." It's the site of a monastic community founded in 635 by St. Aidan – a monk from Iona. Lindisfarne is actually just over the border in England. It's an island twice a day when the high tides from the North Sea surround it. It was on Lindisfarne that I first saw "starlight." To me, starlight is a romantic concept mentioned in poems and songs - - but really, who ever sees it? Even in our rural area, with little light pollution, I've seen bright starry skies, but I've never seen light cast on the earth by stars. On Lindisfarne I woke up at 2am and walked in the dark over to my hotel room window that overlooked the sea. There was no moon – and the stars carpeted the sky. I walked outside passed the old monastic ruins and down to the beach. It was there that I could see the dim silhouettes of Holy Island lit only by the light of the stars. Sometimes it overwhelms me to think about how small we really are.

Once I returned home from Scotland, Dan and I settled into our house for summer and made some living adjustments based on his health issues. I looked out in our back yard at our 31-foot travel trailer and knew Dan wouldn't be able to tow it any more or manage all the mechanics of operating it. I could probably figure out the operations, but I was terrified to tow it. I once pulled the small camper we had prior to that trailer just 5 miles to the state park near our house. It swayed so much that I couldn't stomach another drive like that. So, I gave up on towing, and Dan always pulled the campers.

A guest on one of our tours told me that a 5<sup>th</sup> wheel RV (one that actually hooks into the bed of a pick-up truck) was like towing "nothing." Super-easy. So, I researched 5<sup>th</sup> wheels that could be pulled by the size truck we had. I found a new 31-foot Artic Wolf 5<sup>th</sup> wheel that I liked at a dealership in Pennsylvania. I ventured out by myself, looked at the RV, negotiated a good price with our trade in - and bought it the same day. Crazy – I know. Dan just went along with the idea ... mostly because trying to convince me to do otherwise would have been futile. My mind was set on getting the 5<sup>th</sup> wheel and it was best to bless me and release me. It turns out that I CAN tow the thing ... frontwards only for now. And towing a 5<sup>th</sup> wheel is – as our guest noted – almost like towing nothing. I did great at bringing it home once I figured out how to stop burning up the brakes. Until I can get the hang of moving the thing in reverse, Dan does all the "backing in."

We spent eight weeks in the 5<sup>th</sup> wheel this year, at campgrounds close to home. I worked from the campsites – beginning my mornings at a table with panoramic views of Eastern Shore sunrises and sunsets. The best part of that experience was being together.

In June, I asked Dan where he'd like to travel if he could go anywhere. He said, Newfoundland and Labrador. So, for his birthday I planned a 10-day trip. We flew into the small community airport in the northern part of Newfoundland, rented a car, and arrived at our Airbnb by nightfall. The owner warned us to watch out for moose on the roads. There are evidently more moose in Newfoundland than people. We woke up the next morning on Dan's 66<sup>th</sup> birthday, to views of Rocky Harbor and the Gulf of St. Lawrence. Later we explored a ten-mile pond gorge formed by glaciers in the Long Range Mountains (the most northern section of the Appalachians). You have to walk 1.5 miles to board the boat that takes you into a fjord that is lined with waterfalls, cliffs and rock formations. In our travels there we visited three world heritage sites, watched whales interact with our boat captain, saw a giant iceberg shatter in front of us, touched a 650-million-year-old rock formation, and walked onto the "Tablelands" – one of the few places where the Earth's mantle is exposed.

In Labrador we stayed three nights in a Lightkeepers House at the Point Amour. The village has a population 8 people (recorded in 2006 - down from 14 in 1998). The lighthouse is the tallest in Atlantic Canada, and except for a small gift shop and museum that close at 4 pm daily, we had the entire lighthouse compound to ourselves. It was enchanting – to be there on the edge of Labrador, atop a cliff overlooking the Strait of Belle Isle with nothing to fill the senses except the sound of the wind and sea, the pulse of the light in the tower and company of each other.

The first morning in the lightkeeper's house, the fog was so thick that almost nothing was visible. Dan wasn't in the house and I was worried about him. I opened the door and called for him, but knew that he probably couldn't hear me. Just as I was going out to look for him, I saw him – coming through the fog, moving slowly supported by his cane. He'd been out walking.... taking it all in. It was in that moment, when I could see nothing but his fragile frame in a vast background of white, that I knew – like I had never known before - how lucky we were to be sharing that time together. Those moments on a foggy cliff in Labrador were fleeting and passed quickly, but it's a blessing to experience them again and again in my memory.

As the fog started to lift that morning, I grabbed my camera hoping to get a misty shot of the lighthouse. But by the time I walked out to where I could get a full view, the fog was completely gone. In the space of ten minutes the morning light put edges and color on everything - even the tiny trace of the moon still in the sky. It was then that I snapped the image that appears on the cover of this card. I think the time spent at Point Amour Lighthouse was my best memory of 2018. We loved Labrador.

In September Dan flew out to join the second of my two back-to-back tours of Ireland. On the last day of the tour he took a hard fall and bruised his ribs. The doctor noticed an abnormality in the chest x-rays and referred us to a lung clinic where Dan was diagnosed with Stage 3 lung cancer. Currently, he's moving through 7 weeks of daily radiation treatments and chemotherapy. Though he has become very tired, he is lucky that his cancer doesn't produce a lot of pain. It was a frightening diagnosis, but great strides have been made in the last few years for lung cancer treatment. The doctors say they think it can be controlled, and we choose to be hopeful and positive. We're discussing options for another trip this year to someplace Dan has always wanted to visit.

One blessing that comes with our challenges is the raw appreciation for every moment spent together, and the commitment to getting "out of our heads" and into our bodies - living in the present. I've spent most of my life setting and reaching goals. When I was younger, I worried about the future. Then I started planning the future - always looking to what was coming up, what I wanted to achieve or accomplish. Goals are good, and planning can be fun and fulfilling. But no one is promised the future. Sickness comes to most of us eventually - and when our time is up - it's up. The only reality is the present reality - this moment. Dan and I are living in that belief, and every day is better because of it.

In Ireland this year, while standing in front of a 5000-year-old dolmen, a guest asked me why the ancient people engaged in human sacrifice. What was their motivation? I'm no historian. And the answer I offered was that no one knows for sure. Some suspect that the ancients worshiped the light - the sun. Perhaps they believed that the eternal creator was embodied in the sun. As the days got shorter and the hours of light lessened, they may have feared that the light would eventually expire and the world would fade into darkness and death. So, in order to win forgiveness and favor with the deity, and insure that the light would return, the ancients sacrificed something very precious - life itself. The new religion (Christianity) changed this thinking. Rather than showing the Divine Presence as a harsh entity to be feared, it presented God as a loving father - a father who sent his son as to teach us how to replace fear with love, who taught us that real power doesn't come from dominating others, but from loving others - and being loved in return.

And that Son - that savior who was born as an innocent human child at the darkest time of the year - brought the promise of eternal light - a light that no darkness can extinguish. He is the center of the Christmas story. It's what we remind ourselves of every year at this time. Darkness may come, but love vanquishes it every single time. Our hope lies that love. And the love that we have in you, dear friends is the balm that heals, and the light that illuminates all of our dark moments. Here's to walking in the light this Christmas. May God bless you and those you love in the coming year.

A handwritten signature in purple ink, appearing to read "Neville".