

December 14, 2020.



Merry Christmas from Marion Station. I write this to you from my 2nd story office, which has a panoramic view of the south side of my home. I'm fortunate to write while looking out through the treetops of magnolia, crape myrtle and maple trees. Today it's gloomy and pouring rain which is good when one needs to be in a reflective mood. This is surely, the hardest Christmas letter I've ever written.

It's an understatement to say that 2020 was a difficult year. With the all that hit us – the virus, separation from loved ones, isolation, economic hardships and the angst about when it will all go back to normal – if it will ever go back to what we knew as “normal” - it's been such a stressful year. For us, that stress was capped by the loss of my husband, Dan Burgoyne. As most of you know, Dan has been ill for several years. Just ten days ago, Dan slipped peacefully away while he was at home under the care of hospice. He had been hospitalized for several months during the year and he finally decided he'd had enough of hospitals. Dan made the decision to go home and live out his days in that comfortable and familiar place that we've shared for the last 18 years. He was only home for a month, but it was a month when he was surrounded by love. If there is any beauty in dying, Dan certainly found it. When all of these restrictions are lifted and we're able to gather safely, we will have a memorial service for him – a beautiful celebration of his life. But for now, we press on, and try to find peace in this blessed season when we recall everything we've ever loved.

With the Covid restrictions, we couldn't travel much in 2020, and Dan's health was poor. So, we spent a portion of nearly every week in our RV just five miles from our house at Janes Island State Park. We always had a campsite that faced the water overlooking the expansive saltmarsh, and Dan was so happy there. He'd wake up early to catch the sun slowly rising behind us – spreading a gradual light over the marsh. The color changes are amazing. He was happy to sit outside under the loblolly pines and wait for me to finish working. In the late afternoon, we'd have a meal that I cooked over the fire and then we'd watch one of the most magnificent sunsets in Maryland. All the campers would come to the waterfront and participate in this sort of silent benediction as the blazing sun dipped beneath the horizon setting the entire sky and marsh alight with pinks and purples. Families would bring their chairs to watch it together, lovers would snap selfies, even

the dogs on leashes seemed to know something spectacular was going on – and Dan I would watch them and watch the sunset always marveling at how something so simple and free – something that happens every day, can be so surprising and fulfilling.

With making all of those campfire meals, and having few options for eating out, I became super interested in outdoor cooking. I bought my first charcoal grill (a Weber Performer Deluxe with crimson kettle) – and since I don't do anything halfway, I also bought a side burner, a Christopher Knight outdoor dining set, a Christopher Knight wood bar cart, an Acacia wood outdoor rocker... and cushions for all the chairs ... and a table umbrella ... and dinnerware ... and lots of deck décor. (Happy birthday and happy Mother's Day to me). So, when we weren't at the campground, we were on our beautiful deck eating wonderfully healthy food that I cooked on the Weber talking about our lives, our hopes and reminiscing about good times.

We did take one trip in 2020, and it was perhaps, the best vacation we ever had. I'm not sure if it ranked so high because it was that great, or because Dan and I both secretly suspected it might be his last trip. We made the most of every cherished moment, and did our best to just live in those moments. Just before his birthday, I asked him where he wanted to go and he said, "Maine. I want to see the coast, and my brothers." So, a few days after that, we headed north. We had a wonderful visit with Dan's brothers and their families, and from there we headed to a rented, converted Methodist church near Boothbay. Dan awoke on his 68th birthday in his beloved home state of Maine. The restored church had three bedrooms, a living / dining area, a well-equipped kitchen, and a large deck that wrapped around the back of the building shaded by an oak grove. Inside the building, the woodwork and stained-glass windows were still in place, and the feel of blessing and sacred space was still present. In the evening, we'd climbed up into the bell tower and watch the sun set over Ocean Harbor where it meets the Damariscotta River. We ate lobster every other night and enjoyed a visit with my sister / cousin, Katie and her partner Robin who lived nearby. We reminisced about our childhoods and families and laughed until we cried. Dan didn't want to leave. I asked him a few times after we got home where he'd like to go next. His response was always the same. "Back to the church in Maine."

I'm grateful for the outpouring of love and support that came in from friends and family with the news of Dan's passing. So many people remarked that ours was a great love story, which I guess is true. It's hard to tell when you're inside the story. When I think of a great love story, I don't see it as being something you can tell ... but more something that is lived...lived in the intimate moments between those who love, and only they get the full view. Those moments between husband and wife, parent and child, sibling and friends - they are private and exclusive, and they build on prior moments. Every love story weaves its way through happiness and hardships, joys and sorrows, and somehow the love endures and it shapes the story. The blessing is when you can understand all of your own love stories. And if you can use two or more hands to count the number of love stories in your life - wow! You're abundantly blessed.

I notice when scrolling through my Facebook newsfeed how many new babies have been born to my virtual friends. There are so many pictures of these little faces and tiny hands and the proud parents and grandparents - so full of joy. It brings it all full circle. One life fades as another emerges. While we say goodbye to the departed, new life blooms all around us. With each birth, every little baby is full of potential. Every parent exudes such hope and gratitude. And this mammoth wave of love envelops all of them making everyone's troubles evaporate in those precious moments. If only we could experience the Christ child like that each Christmas - as an annual renewal of untarnished, newly-birthed love that wraps around us and resurrects hope and belief in the potential that we all still have to keep that love going - a love so radiant we can't look away. A love that blinds us to present obstacles and sorrows, numbs us to pain, and opens a wide view to blessings and promise on our path forward.

No one gets through this life without sorrow. No one lives without stress and worry. And hardships aren't evenly dealt. The best we can hope for is that we can be strong enough to love and not become closed off or bitter as we pull through those rough times. As I was writing Dan's obituary, I knew I had to put down his life's accomplishments – his college degree, his time as an ironworker, a grape grower, a beekeeper – those achievement milestones. But they aren't the things that made Dan a great man. What if at the end we weren't recognized for what we had accomplished, but were measured by how much we loved?

What I wanted to write for his obit was far more personal – an inside look at what made this amazing person – my favorite human - Dan Burgoyne a man so loved by friends and family. He was scarred by many sorrows – the sudden loss of loved ones, the pressures of raising a family, a failed business, the struggle of alcoholism, the toll that hard work took on his body, carrying the burden of terminal illness, and the slow loss of his ability to care for himself - these were the circumstances of his inside story. He walked with them every day and never complained. What made Dan great was that despite his burdens, he was always able to surrender to love. He loved without holding back. He was always ready with a smile, a hug, a touch on the shoulder - abandoning any prior hurt feeling or tension that may have existed. Even on his deathbed, his final words were those expressing his love for us. Isn't that the greatest thing? Accomplishments are worth appreciating – but those who can love freely are the greatest among us.

I visited my daughter Lara this past weekend and notice that Christ child was missing from her Christmas creche. This was a tradition always present in my family – and also in our church. You could deck out the whole house, put up the lights, trim the tree, and position the Christmas creche in a prominent place with all the figures – Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, the angel, maybe a donkey and a cow, but the manger was empty until midnight on Christmas Eve. It was at that magic moment when the infant would finally find his place in the manger bed. Then on Christmas morning – the baby is in the manger marking the shift from anticipation to arrival - the newness of Christmas morning and the promise of the coming light.

This is my Christmas wish for you - that the magic and mystery of the Christ child will bless you with a love so great this Christmas morning that it will wash over you with healing and light and ignite a flame of gratitude and recognition in you of your greatest gifts, blinding you to sorrow or pain. And that the same love will sustain you through anything the next year brings, and magnify your joys and blessings.

The tree on the cover of this card sits on a hillside at a famous spot called "Ladies View" in Killarney National Park. In 1861, Queen Victoria's Ladies in Waiting stopped at this site and admired the view, which was later named for them. There's a little scenic viewing area where cars and busses can pull off and people can walk down to a platform and take in the "Ladies View." We stopped here on my Ireland tour in 2019. We were late in the season so there were few tourists. While most of my tour group ventured down to the platform, I found myself heading away from there - ascending up the hill on the opposite side to spend some time alone. Dan was not able to be with me on that tour due to his failing health. I saw this lone birch tree perched on the edge of a hill. It was so exposed - off by itself. The wind had stripped off its leaves, while other trees still hadn't shed theirs completely, and the stones at the base of the tree kept it from sliding off the hillside. I recall thinking of Dan and his love of birch trees at that moment, knowing how he would have loved that spot. When our tours to start again next year, I hope to return to this spot.

Looking at the picture now, I'm reminded that those bare branches hold the promise of summer shade and the future sound of rustling leaves in the warm winds that blow across those mountains as the seasons change. I was there at the golden hour, and the light was magical when I snapped this picture trying to capture that still moment in time. Later Dan and I decided it was perfect for our Christmas card. The cards, of course were printed before Dan passed, but he saw them and approved of the design - So know that he sends his wishes across the veil and they are joined with mine - - that all of you, our friends and family - will be blessed abundantly this Christmas with love circling around you.

May God bless you and those you love.

A handwritten signature in purple ink, appearing to read "Neville". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.