

## Presents/Presence

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I made it through another birthday.

I am still here.

The longer I live, the more it seems death is all around me.

All of my grandparents are gone, though their stories still guide me. Both of my parents are gone; I seem stubbornly unable to get used to that fact, and still enjoy their influence in many aspects of my life. Of eleven brothers and sisters, there are only six left. I miss the ones that have died, and cherish the ones still here. That's all I can do.

At my class reunion in July, it was noted that a full ten percent of our graduating class had passed on. Another member died this week. In every case, I think, "Oh, so young!" I am, of course, remembering them as they were in high school.

I guess I'm not "so young" anymore. That is made clear every time a friend, acquaintance or family member dies. It's always too soon and I am never prepared. It may even, age-wise, be a bit below the average life-expectancy...but, clearly, I am now in that age where loss of contemporaries is a big part of life.

It seems the only thing to do, while I'm still here, is to truly be present in this world, in my life.

Early birthday celebrations with my family and friends brought good wishes and cards and gifts: books, bags and bath salts, bottles of wine and a bottle of *Bailey's Irish Creme*. Later, an annual birthday dinner with my cousins provided much laughter and good cheer, and more thoughtful presents. There were cards in the mail and hand-delivered cards and messages. A complete birthday meal, fully prepared, wrapped and delivered by my friend, Pam, to be reheated at dinnertime. Over one hundred birthday greetings on *Facebook*. Telephone calls from each of my daughters and from one grandson, each one a treasured gift.

There have been unexpected presents. I was invited to attend a benefit dinner, held at a stately old island home. We dined on lobster and steak under a beautiful evening sky. I received a big bouquet of gladiolus from two nice ladies who accepted a ride to the grocery store with me. A big, flowered bag was hanging on my doorknob the other day, filled with treats and treasures and a thank-you note. It was from my neighbors, who have a rustic cabin in the woods, and – with my blessing – draw water from my well when they are on the island. None of the gift-givers knew it was my birthday week!

There are other gifts:

- My little dog, who wakes me with kisses, and greets me at the end of the day with a wildly wagging tail, who entertains me, keeps me company and makes me laugh every single day.
- A doe and her twin fawns, who I often see at the end of the Fox Lake Road.
- The wild blackberries ripening in the fields around my house.
- Fox Lake, a short drive from my home, where the dog loves the smells, and I love the view.
- My aunt, who struggles with health issues but is still able to share stories, opinions and memories from her long life.
- A job that supports me, and gives me a feeling of accomplishment. I would never have predicted that I would be capable of tasks like cutting and threading pipe, making keys and mixing paint, and that I would get such satisfaction from the ability to do them.

- Other jobs that enrich me: artist, baker, cook, gardener, writer.
- My big, blessed family.
- My friends, far and near.
- My home, shelter in this world.
- The moon, last night, in that deep blue sky.
- The big owl that nests nearby, perches on my fence post, and spreads his wings to fly when I come home after dark (and who, thank God, leaves my little dog alone!).
- The sunrise every morning and the sunset every night.
- This beautiful island in the middle of Lake Michigan.
- The beach all around, with stunning views all year.

These are the gifts that I tend to take for granted, that go too often unnoticed or unappreciated.

It seems the best thing to do, while I'm still here, is to truly be present in this world, in my life.