



This is a Mother's Day gift for someone I hold most dear. She requested words. This is for her:

In the long landscape of time, my days floated by like dandelion parachutes in the August air. As a young man, I scarcely nodded at the crests and valleys of experience. Now, in the fullness of the late seasons of my life, the whispers and rumors of finitude shape and tint each passing hour. I am like a Japanese diner presented with a beautifully arranged meal of fugu fish. The artistry, colors, textures, and flavors intensify under the shadow of extinction.

I am at last able to recognize those crystalline days of soft spirit and sublimity as I live them. The writer Annie Dillard says these insights, these epiphanies, can come to those who wait for it, but it is always "a gift and a total surprise." "I cannot cause light," she writes. "The most I can do is try to put myself in the path of its beam."

I want to thank you for sharing one special day in May with me under that beam of light.

Kurt Vonnegut, in his book *Timequake*, speaks of his uncle Alex. "My uncle Alex Vonnegut...taught me something very important. He said that when things were really going well we should be sure to notice it."

"He was talking about simple occasions, not great victories: maybe drinking lemonade on a hot afternoon in the shade, or smelling the aroma of a nearby bakery, or fishing and not caring if we catch anything or not, or hearing somebody all alone playing a piano really well in the house next door."

"Uncle Alex urged me to say this out loud during such epiphanies: 'If this isn't nice, what is?'"

Our day together was one of those occasions when all the Fates conspire, a Prussian blue sky and enchantment afoot in the ether, moments that break the spirit's sleep. And best of all, I knew it. The events unfolded like the petals of an orchid, subtle, perfumed with emotion.

We walked quietly in the Japanese Gardens. You held my hand. No one has ever done that. We sat in the spring sunlight in front of the pavilion, a caravanserai for lodging dreams. Two fallen petals floated past in a clear stream, swirled and touched, pirouetted together and fused.

Later we dined on the foods of the East: squid, Jasmine rice, curries, coconut milk, Thai prawns. At a concert, the tender voice of the Islands, the slack-key guitar, sang poems of a people's hearts.

It was the nicest day I ever had, and I knew it.

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"Money doesn't always buy happiness. People with ten million dollars are no happier than people with nine million dollars." Hobart Brown

FROM THE LOWER LEFT CORNER

Victoria Stoppiello

What I learned on my spring vacation

We awoke to a downpour yesterday morning, a steady spring rain that makes the grass grow, seeds germinate, and slugs proliferate. It felt like a good morning to have a small fire in the woodstove.

Because we recycle all the paper we can, we have a small refuse container in the kitchen for "burnables" that can't be recycled, and that's what we use to start fires. We're getting to the time of year when wood stove fires are unnecessary, and those small paper bags of waste have to go in the trash and eventually to the land fill. So, the psychological warmth of a fire this morning seemed attractive, especially since I'd be able to utilize that little bag of sales slips, butter wrappers, and so forth.

Hit the fire. A few minutes later I came back into the living room and was startled by the warmth emanating from the woodstove. You see, we've been away for three weeks, working on the Central California coast near San Luis Obispo. You're probably thinking, quite accurately, that the weather there was warm and dry, with spring further along than here, a thousand miles further north. Indeed it was. California poppies, bush lupine, ceanothus, and various sages cloaked the hillsides and perfumed the air.

It's true the climate is warmer there, but what really made the difference was that we stayed in a passive solar, timber frame and straw bale construction guest house. That house didn't get cold, nor did it get hot. It was roughly the same moderate temperature all the time, whether the outside temperature was close to 80 degrees in the afternoon, or below 40 at night. And, there was no furnace or wood stove. The cottage interior temperature was very stable, warmed by the sun striking a concrete floor, and that warmth insulated by the straw bale walls, which provide a minimum of R-29 insulation, superior to the Washington energy code's R-21.

The point is that I could feel a palpable difference—no cold spots in the house, no hot spots, no drafts. The cottage was designed and built by a couple of sophisticated architects at the San Luis Obispo Sustainability Group as an adjunct to their home and offices. Ken Haggard and Polly Cooper's complex has received national attention for its implementation of solar heating and cooling, solar and low-head hydro electrical generation, straw bale construction, and natural daylighting employing sky lids, light shelves and other techniques.

In other words, we were living in a model of sustainable design for a couple weeks, and now I look at our woodstove differently. As much as I enjoy its dry heat and cozy tradition, I'm thinking there's got to be a better way, even in this climate with less sun and more rain. I know that in Northern Germany, they're experimenting with transparent insulation—yes, walls that allow light into the house while insulating it far better than our double or triple-pane windows. I know that with new construction, we could have higher levels of insulation, whether conventional batts or straw bale, than in our retrofitted 1895 house, which already uses 60% less energy than most new houses built in Washington. I'm also reminded that the oldest building in Nebraska is built of strawbales covered with stucco, so it's got me thinking.

When we left on this "sabbatical," I expected to enjoy the weather, the people, and learn a few things while my husband made some money working with his long time friends and colleagues at the Sustainability Group. I didn't expect to come back with an uneasy feeling, a slight dissatisfaction with what we've done so far with our own home.

I'm starting to dream of a passive solar house—yes, it'll work here on the Northwest coast, with just a little help from a woodstove—plus a courtyard facing south, protected from our summer northwest winds. And the little creek that sang by the San Luis Obispo cottage, that would be nice too. Victoria Stoppiello is a writer living in Ilwaco, at the lower left corner of Washington state.

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