

Learning to Live without a plan

Just checked the mail and found a letter from IBM, my late husband's employer. In brief it was asking me to confirm that I was still alive. Guess they're doing their annual culling of the survivor pension cheques.

It made me wonder. What am I still doing here?

Every night when I go to sleep I hope I won't wake up. It's not a death wish. I certainly would not do anything to make it happen but if it did that would be fine by me. No one is left who would be upset by my departure; except my niece who might miss our weekly telephone chats. I am her last living relative and she appreciates family.

The fact is I'm bored. My legs don't work very well anymore and my balance is shot to hell so going outside to enjoy a bit of exercise in nice weather is more perilous than pleasant. Friends take me out for a drive on occasion but frankly the endless small talk is exhausting. I used to enjoy reading but the dubious joys of ageing include the onset of macular degeneration so focusing on a page has become more of a chore than a pleasure. There's always television but deafness in both ears means I either wear cumbersome headphones or blow the roof off the place with the volume. Besides, have you seen the drivel they're showing on television these days? Watching DVDs isn't bad but it's not often I get a movie that I like.

I guess the bottom line is that after a lifetime spent planning my next move, re-inventing myself to face the next upset and overcoming some pretty daunting obstacles, there's nothing left to do – and no physical ability to do it anyway.

But there's entertainment to be found in remembering.

Not necessarily the first 50 years, though there were a few highlights in my childhood. But thinking about those years reminds me why I am resilient. They also give me a sense of pride in myself for not allowing their events to crush my spirit and destroy my creative instincts.

Long story short Born in Somerset, England. Mother a narcissistic ex London vaudeville dance hall star. Father a dour, Scottish schoolteacher who routinely left the family each summer holiday for parts unknown. One brother, Anthony, seven years my junior whom Father always called "boy". He moved to Jamaica when he turned 30 and completely left my life. One sister Adrienne, twelve years younger than I who tragically died in a small plane crash at the tender age of 21.

A bright spot was my service as a Wireless Operator in the Royal Canadian Air Force – discharged in 1943, age 23.

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(Probably suffering from “Daddy issues”), I started dating a man 20 years my senior. Sam was a Colonel in the Canadian Armed Forces, very distinguished, especially in his uniform. Apparently he had spotted me on stage, at some military song and dance show and determined to woo me. Once we had married it took no time to discover he was in fact an introvert who suffered from clinical depression and had a gambling problem. Thankfully, given the circumstances, we had no children. Our challenging marriage lasted for twenty years when Sam chose to hang himself, not surprisingly from the second floor railing in our home.

By then I’d become the sole caregiver for my narcissistic Mother.

Between Sam and Mother “*Just keep putting one foot in front of the other*” was my mantra. And I did just that.

Mother finally died and after an entire life of being tied to others I was free.

It was terrifying.

But now I could finally start choosing my own destiny. In this one I could make plans. And this first plan was centred on “just me”. Taking charge meant learning how to live alone and take care of a house. Learning became my new mantra.

I met Eric at a “Small Appliance Repair” course at a local school. For reasons I still don’t fathom he fell in love with me and when I was 56 years old, we married.

The good stuff had arrived!

Eric and I moved back to England in our mid-60’s so that he could be close to his daughter. We set up house in Grange over Sands in the Lake District of England. It was an adventure, a re-invention of my life, and I was good at those.

We bought a fixer-upper and crafted it into our own nest; we joined the Ramblers and regularly hiked the gorgeous hillsides. In our previous life in Marmora, Ontario my learning obsession had been rocks, mostly agates which we polished and made into wind chimes, lampshades, clocks - anything that lent itself to the stone. Since I could now buy fleece from local farmers my new learning obsession became spinning yarn on a spanking new spinning wheel that I like to think made me look like a pioneer. The yarn turned into clothes. Sometimes it just stayed as yarn since my fun was in the choosing of a fleece, the carding of the wool and the act of spinning.

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I took up volunteering at a local Charity Shop, partly to make friends (*something I am **not** good at doing*) and partly to get a sense of the town and its people. Eric threw himself into his passions for gardening in the summer and woodworking in the winter. He even set up an outdoor goldfish pond and spent hours figuring out how to keep them healthy.

With Europe now at our doorstep, we regularly took trips to exotic places like Malta and Greece, to soak up local lore. We read tons of books and revelled in the time spent planning.

The island of Chios was a particular favorite. I fell in love with the Greek culture and took a correspondence course to learn the Greek language. Apparently I was their oldest student – a fact that goaded me to also become the student who graduated with their highest grade!

Artsy by nature, I learned how to make baskets out of local pine needles and went so far as to briefly co-own a small tourist shop with an unorthodox English woman who had lived in Chios for years. It was a chance to finally use my christened first name, Ariadne, bestowed by my academic father to spite my music hall mother.

For the first time in my life I felt truly loved. Eric's birthday, anniversary and Christmas cards to me were always filled with words of affection. I still have the one he gave me for our 25th Anniversary:

“My Darling Wife,

This is a measly little acknowledgement of 25 years of your love, kindness and simply being your wonderful self, No flowers, no banquet and no wild night out. I suppose that is the way it is with us. Just my deep love for you is all I can give you in exchange for the 25 wonderful years of life that you have given me. I hope that I am and have been all that you need and I hope to be by your side as long as you need me. May we have more happy years to enjoy each other.

With my deepest love, respect and admiration.

Your own Eric

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I was 81 years old. Eric was 82. A fine reminder that there may be gray on the roof but there can still be passion in the belly.

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I'd like to think that I did my bit.

Outward affection is not my way so I showed my love through acts of appreciation. To reward his hours of work in his veggie patch, I was adept at coming up with tantalizing recipes. From relish to casseroles, I know what to do with parsnip!!!

To satisfy his sweet tooth, I would create tasty yet healthy desserts worthy of 5 stars. His birthdays meant a formal menu, complete with a selection of appropriate wines, our best crystal and silverware and, of course, the linen table cloth!

Many of our hobbies were joint ventures. My rock passion and Eric's woodworking passion resulted in extraordinary table lamps and clocks. I sussed out local craft fairs to sell our wares which satisfied Eric's love of talking about his hobbies. The list goes on but all in all we rubbed along perfectly. It was mostly just the 2 of us, with the occasional visits from family, but life was full. We were content.

Until, two years after we celebrated our 25th wedding anniversary. Eric had a stroke. In a matter of days our happy life was over.

It was not the first time I'd had to re-invent myself.

The next couple of years were busy. The house was too much for one person. There was no-one to tend the garden and it wasn't any fun to cook just for myself. I started to lose weight and energy. It was time to sell up and move into the only Retirement home in Grange over Sands, a dismal old mansion with tiny rooms and multiple stairs.

My niece Jane and her husband Michael came to visit me. She didn't say much but I found out later that she was appalled to see her fiercely independent, active aunt June living in such a tiny room, at the mercy of subpar meals, surrounded by old people just waiting to pop their clogs. There was no light in my eyes and worst of all there was no sign of the passion for learning that she knew and admired. For the first time since she'd known me, she was worried. She also knew there was no point in making her thoughts known.

So she went home to Toronto and started her weekly 'phone calls. *"Have you thought about moving back across the pond?" "It might be time to move closer to family". "Let me pull together some information for you"*.

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It worked. At the young age of 85 I finally caved to Jane's nagging and agreed to return to Canada. I had a new plan!

Within a few months she came to Grange over Sands to collect me (*and make sure I came*) and a transatlantic flight later I found myself in the lovely Lakeshore Place Retirement Residence in Burlington with a view of Lake Ontario. I quickly got myself a boyfriend who still drove, became the resident member of the recreation team at my residence, joined the Burlington Seniors Centre and signed up for Chinese Brush Painting and Writing 101.

I had a new lease on life. This plan was working

Then that damn aging process reared its ugly head and the boyfriend had to give up his driver's licence. No more going out for dinner and day trips to gardens and art exhibitions. Somehow that started the onset of boredom, my nemesis.

Until my 90th birthday on June 26, 2010

Jane hosted a family dinner at my favorite Greek restaurant where my great nephew Jake shared his plan to spend that summer working on Fogo Island, off the east coast of Newfoundland. On the drive back to my place I floated the idea to Jane of taking me to visit Jake on Fogo.

(When I was 11 years old, our family left England and emigrated to St. John's, Newfoundland. My childhood memories were blissful and the idea of returning filled my heart). So what if I needed a walker! I was game!

So it was that 3 weeks later, on July 19, we winged our way to Gander, taxied to Farewell and ferried to Fogo for a week's vacation. Not bad for a 90 year old with gammy legs!

On our third day, I spotted an apartment building with a perfect view of the Atlantic Ocean, "*What's that*" I asked innocently. "*It's our Seniors' Community Apartments*" came the answer. Later that evening it occurred to me that if Jane could get me here for a visit, she might be able to get me one of those apartments.

I had a new plan and it was worth a shot. Three months later I was ready for the move.

That Sunday's weather was bright and sunny – good omens for our departure. About 4 p.m. Jane and Michael arrived and after a final flurry of packing, I turned in my key and bade a final farewell to Lakeshore Place. We were soon headed for Toronto airport,

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checked in and our luggage was tagged. My trusty walker was to travel in state enclosed in a large plastic bag so it was exchanged for a comfortable wheelchair.

The flight to St. John's went well and we settled for the night in a very attractive room at a Comfort Inn. The next day we were off to Gander. St. John's to Gander is a short distance so we took a small plane; just ten rows of seats, lined each side. The morning's sunshine deteriorated into banks of dark clouds and we took off into a windy sky for a bumpy flight. Then just as suddenly as it had started the weather improved and we emerged into weak sunshine PLUS a double rainbow. Surely a good omen for my future.

We landed safely in Gander and were soon in another Comfort Inn for the night. True to my avowed intent to eat as much fish as possible in my new life I dined on Cod Chowder which was delicious. I must find a recipe for this dish.

After breakfast our friend Gerald arrived, packed up our luggage and we were off to Farewell in time for the 3 p.m. ferry. Safe at Gerald and Eileen's B&B "Peg's" in time for tea. It was now Tuesday. I'd made it to Fogo.

Wednesday brought the sad news that my furniture van was bogged down in Nova Scotia. It was a lovely sunny day so Jane and I went down to the local emporium that had a surprisingly enormous stock of everything from furniture to clothing. My first purchases in Fogo - a pair of waterproof shoes, warm socks and a bed to be delivered to my new home.

Thursday was again sunny. Would our van carrying my belongings make it?

To our great relief the driver called early to say he had boarded the ferry and was heading our way. Eileen took Jane to the apartment to supervise the unpacking. There was only one casualty - a table. Jane was the one who insisted I bring it, so its damage didn't worry me. It seems the driver had had to make an abrupt stop to avoid hitting a moose and the table catapulted from its safe spot and hit the wall of the van. The driver gave Jane \$100 to cover repairs which was very decent of him.

Jane came down to Peg's for lunch and then went back to my apartment to wash linens in readiness for the delivery of my brand new bed.

So the saga of my return to Fogo is complete. It seems like a long time since I voiced my desire to spend the remainder of my days in this place that is so like the Newfoundland of my happy childhood. But now almost 3 months to the day, through many ups and downs, here I am, the brand new resident of Harbour View Apartments in the town of Fogo on Fogo Island.

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The plan worked. I was re-invented yet again. What's next? *Que sera sera.*

As is my way, I soon started a keep fit program for my fellow residents and become “*that June is a real go-getter*”. My 91st birthday was a big event and I had to admit that I was loving the attention. Even got myself on local television!

The damn aging process reared its ugly head again and early in 2012 I realized that this lovely life in Fogo had become too hard on my body. The local health service was excellent but limited. It was time for another plan. It was time to move to the mainland.

So here I am, now 92 and at the end of my adventures. I am safe and comfortable in the Assisted Living section of the luxurious Tiffany Village Retirement Residence.

And I'm bored.

It's not sad – it's just fact. It is a bit depressing and it does take a good deal of emotional strength to keep from becoming completely miserable. But there it is. The reason why every night when I go to sleep I hope that I don't wake up.

Or I could learn to just let life happen. Squash the compulsion to plan. I shall relish in the bright spots – my recent birthday celebration, that first feel of hot water on my back in the shower, a ray of sunshine through the window, sticky toffee pudding on tonight's menu, that evening shot of Bailey's liquor and nightly visits with the lovely Anne-Marie, my favourite caregiver, to watch “Pick a Puppy”.

Simply put, to open my eyes every morning, make sure I can still move and resolve to savour even the smallest joy of the day. Who knows, I might even learn something.

Note from the author.

Surrounded by people that she knew cared about her, my Aunt June passed away peacefully on March 13, 2013, 3 months shy of her 93rd birthday. Not surprisingly June left me detailed post death wishes, complete with the necessary contacts and paperwork to make them happen. Michael and I buried her ashes next to Eric's in the graveyard of a centuries old parish church in Grange over Sands. The only detail she'd left out was what to put on her headstone. I chose:

*Forever Learning
Truly Loved
Ariadne June Best
1920 - 2013*

I hope she likes it.