

VIEWPOINTS

The Weather Inside Is... Verklempt

BY PAULA DAMON

There should be a law against such sentimental nonsense. Kids' Christmas ornaments.

The ones they make in school and bring home only for the preservation of innocence.

Shouldn't be permissible.

These things are like glitter. They never decompose. Don't disappear. Outlast everything and everyone.

Mark my word. When the world ends, there'll be nothing left but a heap of shoe boxes chock full of paper candy canes, tin foil Christmas bells, tinsel angels and cellophane Santa's.

This stuff is absolutely lethal.

There's nothing worse for a mother's sense of loss than coming upon that quintessential collection, shaped by tiny hands and giant imaginations.

I'm a victim of such holiday shenanigans while quietly going about my business of downsizing the clutter I've accumulated over 40 years.

And, what to my wondering eyes should appear but a box of ornaments made in elementary years.

Showing its wear with creased corners and squashed middle, the box was marked "Children's School Deco."

Notice, I didn't label it too syrupy, like "Sweetest kiddo ornaments guaranteed to melt my heart." [Maybe it won't get to me this time.]

Maybe. I don't trust the word "maybe." Depending on who's saying "maybe," it could mean either yes or no. There's really no such thing as "maybe." People just say it to put off the truth.

Well, in this case "maybe" means "no."

I pull that box right down off the shelf and set it beside me, as though it's a lost puppy looking for a good home.

Haven't looked inside for some 25 years. Even though I wince at the notion, I proceed.

Here's a red felt stocking, adorned with holiday rick-rack and "Nicholas" in his first-grade penmanship printed on the white trim across the top.

I'm sorry, but I'm getting a little choked up with emotion – in other words verklempt. Talk among yourselves. Here's a topic: brain-eating amoebas – friend or foe?

Our last child left the house more than 14 years ago. By now, I should have let go.

Here's a stocking made of two paper cut outs from a grocery sack with holes punched along the sides, laced with red yarn.

Next, a mobile head of Santa. It's sort of creepy, but we mothers tend to overlook these things.

Look at this? An ornament made of Popsicle sticks in the shape of a house. It has glitter, more red yarn and the sweetest photo ever of our middle child sitting in front of a giant December calendar – an image of Santa on every day.

Here I go again. Verklempt. Please talk among yourselves. Here's a topic: Adult male: fact or fiction?

Okay, I'm better now.

Finally, waiting for excavation at the bottom of the box is none other than Rudolf. His antlers are worn and his bright shiny red nose has faded. Still, his eyes are as blue as can be.

No, wait; one's green and the other's blue. Now that I notice it, same goes for the eyelashes.

And the antlers. One's all brown and the other's brown with blue, green and purple points. What can I say? Creative genius at work here!

Like I said, these things aren't going anywhere. They're staying right here. So much for downsizing. There should be a law.

Paula Bosco Damon is a national award-winning writer whose columns appear weekly in regional newspapers in the Upper Midwest. The author conducts readings of her works and writing workshops for beginning writers. For more information, email boscodamon.paula@gmail.com.



THINKING ABOUT HEALTH

Medicare Makes It Easier For Doctors To Offer End-of-Life Counseling

BY TRUDY LIEBERMAN

Rural Health News Service

What a difference six years makes!

In 2009 at the height of the debate on the Affordable Care Act, New York's former lieutenant governor Betsy McCaughey appeared on television and made this startling remark: "Congress would make it mandatory-absolutely require that every five years people in Medicare have a required counseling session that will tell them how to end their life sooner."

McCaughey said the proposed law would help the elderly learn how to "decline nutrition, how to decline being hydrated, how to go in to hospice care...all to do what's in society's best interest or in your family's best interest and cut your life short."

Her remarks, though false, played well in the media. Former GOP vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin showed up on TV to talk about "death panels" that she and others claimed would ration care at the end of life.

"No death panels" became a rallying cry for opposition to the health law. A man I interviewed at a Pennsylvania Wal-Mart that summer brought up the so-called death panels. "If people are going to die, he [Obama] is going to put them to sleep," he told me. "It's like Soylent Green (a 1973 science fiction movie). That's his health plan."

Another man I met outside a church in Scranton told me, "I am against a panel of doctors telling you when you can live and die." When I explained that wasn't what the law would do, he said he didn't believe me.

If the death panel hysteria taught us anything, it's that false beliefs die hard. Polls from the Kaiser Family Foundation conducted from 2010

through 2014 repeatedly found that 30 to 40 percent of respondents mistakenly believed that the health law established a government panel to make end-of-life decisions for Medicare beneficiaries.

In the wake of the political storm that followed the death panel hysteria, Congress dropped provisions in the ACA that would have paid doctors to counsel their patients about end-of-life treatment. Later Medicare tried to add such consultations to a package of proposed regulations but again scrapped the idea because as Oregon Rep. Earl Blumenauer, who championed the provision, told the *New York Times*, "The administration got cold feet and yanked it."

But "the times they are a changin'." With hardly a peep of opposition Medicare announced in October that beginning next year it will pay health-care professionals, including nurse practitioners, for discussing end-of-life decisions with their patients. In fact, Medicare said a large majority of the public comments on the proposal agreed the time has come for such consultations.

A new Kaiser poll found that about 89 percent of adults say doctors should discuss end-of-life care issues with their patients and 81 percent reported said they believed Medicare should cover those discussions. "Almost universally, people say doctors should be talking to their patients about this," Lisa Hamel, who directs Kaiser's public opinion research, told the *Times*. But when Kaiser asked people if they had had these discussions only 17 percent said yes. Half of those who had not had such conversations said they wanted one.

Americans are just not comfortable discussing death and care at the end

of life. Medicare payments might just be the spark needed to make such conversations more likely. Doctors and other healthcare professionals will be able to bill Medicare \$86 for the first half hour conversation in a doctor's office and \$75 for an additional 30 minutes. And if a doctor needs to talk later on about the subject, Medicare will pay again.

No one, however, should think those relatively small payments will instantly make it easier for seniors to have their wishes carried out. Even if they do what the doctor advises and set up powers of attorney, make advance directives, and fill out other documents that specify what kind of care they want or don't want if they become incapacitated, the decision could be taken from them.

Families often complain that treatment decisions are still made by hospitals and doctors and that even when patients and their families say they don't want extraordinary measures, it's hard to buck the ingrained culture of medical professionals trained to do everything possible.

Still, we've moved way beyond where we were in that summer of 2009, and people preparing for the consultations with their physicians might want to consider the following:

Keep your wishes up to date in legal documents.

Have end-of-life discussions with your family before an illness strikes.

Make sure the person with your power of attorney knows what he or she is supposed to do.

We'd like to hear about your end-of-life experiences with family members. Write to Trudy at trudy.lieberman@gmail.com.

We Truly Enjoy Fortunate Lives In Good Times

BY BOB MERCER

State Capitol Bureau

PIERRE – One of the great enjoyments of the winter holiday season is the music.

Not my singing, mind you. Sister B. asked me to only mouth the words during a school Christmas concert 40-something years ago. I happily complied.

Who says teachers don't know what they're doing?

No, I'm writing about the beauty that springs from the hearts and the souls of people who really can sing and really can play musical instruments.

They live all around us. The holidays provide the stages for them to perform.

So it was on Tuesday night, in our state Capitol's rotunda, when the Daugaards celebrated the annual lighting of the Christmas trees display.

They let Ava Krush, a seventh-grader from Rapid City, push the button. And they sat together, in front of several hundreds of people, and enjoyed songs from some very talented people.

Some very brave people, I should say. Any person who is willing to go before a group or a crowd and sing or play has my admiration.

They step forward at

church services. And sometimes at public events, such as ballgames, they perform The Star Spangled Banner.

It's during the winter holidays when the stars among us are invited to shine the brightest for us.

At the rotunda ceremony came music from three children – Frank, Kylee and Vick – of the Denette and David Becker family playing African instruments.

And songs from Debra Owen, who learned to sing as a girl from Helena.

And songs from the band Houdek, whose name refers to the soil found only in South Dakota.

And of course the Capitol City Children's Chorus.

They played traditional Christmas songs – and a newer song that is now a Christmas tradition too, Happy Xmas (War Is Over), from John Lennon.

This year 97 trees are decorated in the Capitol. The theme is Christmas Around the World.

Egypt, Russia, Switzerland and Mexico are countries highlighted with banners on each of the four sides in the rotunda.

The trees have a variety of nations as their themes. Charities, schools, families, businesses and organizations

decorate them.

One tree is dedicated to the late Dottie Howe. With 12 trees, she began the tradition that now is in year 35 in our Capitol.

A beautifully decorated tree by the St. Mary's Catholic second- and third-graders at Dell Rapids happens to stand next to the governor's office.

Linda Daugaard taught at St. Mary's before her husband won election as governor.

For the Daugaards, this is Christmas No. 5 as South Dakota's first family. They greeted every child and every adult who came forward after the 40-minute ceremony.

I thought perhaps Gov. Dennis Daugaard might sing a bit with his speech. Alas.

His message fit the night. "We are fortunate to live in a peaceful place, with many freedoms," he said.

The children's chorus and Houdek added to the theme with the Lennon song.

"War is over...
"If you want it...
"War is over...
"If you want it..."

And of course, Santa Claus showed up, in the nick of time.

The tree display is open 8 a.m. to 10 p.m. CT daily through Dec. 26. It's worth your time.

Taking The Time For A Wintertime Recharge

BY RICHARD P. HOLM MD

It's been known for eons that in this northern clime, some people feel the winter blues set in when the nights become long, but it was a physician from the National Institutes of Health in the '80s who first named that darkening of mood in winter as "seasonal affective disorder," S-A-D, or SAD. Paradoxically, with the holiday season, mood can significantly sadden in five to twenty percent of us, depending somewhat on how northern your exposure may be.

Some people are just minimally affected, but those with a major depressive illness or manic-depressive condition, may be severely impaired by seasonal change. Certainly those who socialize poorly, move less, live in darker places, and hibernate indoors are at higher risk for winter blues.

The theory is that long

nights alter melatonin and serotonin brain chemical levels, changing our biological clocks. Some experts think SAD is a reflection of thousands of generations when food was scarce in winter, making it necessary to turn down and do less. It's not hard to believe that body juices and thus mood can be influenced by light. Think how poinsettia leaves turn red, or the Christmas cactus blossoms as our winter sets in.

Maybe it is not wrong to settle in on your favorite couch, in front of a warm fire, wrapped in a throw, engrossed in a good book, with a hot cup of your favorite winter beverage. Maybe even snatch a nap. Perhaps we should allow ourselves to take a little time to recharge before the excitement and high energy of spring and summer.

But we cannot forget how physical exercise every day keeps the doctor away.

Winter without exertion means a springtime of weakness and injury. We must keep fit even during the winter weather and even if that means exercise indoors.

I read one report that those living in Iceland do not struggle with SAD. It's thought their lifestyle of rigorous outdoor winter physical activity, exposure to winter sun, and diet of vitamin D saturated fish is the tonic that prevents sadness.

For those who are possibly harmed by a bad mood brought on by the darker winter season, you might benefit from the Icelandic attitude of regular daily winter exercise, plenty of early morning light, outdoor sun when possible, and a diet that includes enough fish and/or vitamin D.

And maybe it's OK to take some time this winter to cozy up and recharge a little too.

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