

JUST ONE MORE HOLIDAY SEASON

“Winter, a lingering season, is a time to gather golden moments, embark upon a sentimental journey, and enjoy every idle hour.”

John Boswell

“In my research, I have been astonished to find that so many other people also know little of the lives of their parents and grandparents, despite the fact that they lived through some pretty interesting decades.”

Elizabeth Keating¹

This morning on the beach I asked for just one more holiday season with mom and dad.

“Sigh.”

It was as though all of nature around me sensed my melancholy mood: an umbrella of dark gray-blue clouds overhead, a blustery wind, a solitary shrimp fishing boat on the horizon, a lone sandpiper on miniature stilt legs working the morning ebbs, the wistful sounds of the waves ...

I recalled the family gatherings in our brick ranch house on Royal Drive in Springboro, Ohio. The house was small but just big enough for all of us.

The house stands empty now.

Just one more time I’d like to pass mom sitting in her living room chair. Bible on her lap. Eager to share a revelatory nugget gleaned from her latest mining of the Word.

Just one more time I’d like to pass dad snoring in his chair, silver hair frazzled like Albert Einstein, finger glued to the remote, the television volume blaring loud enough for the neighbors to hear.

Just one more time I’d like to hear mom laugh: the world’s most contagious laugh, with all of us sitting at the kitchen table, bouts of recurring laughter rolling around the table like the ocean waves coming in—one-after-another—then, after a pause, the ripple of laughter would start again.

We would all laugh at her laugh.

Mom could never get to the punchline of a joke without laughing. “Did you hear about the fellow who died,” she would start out with all the grandkids listening intently, “and his casket was placed in a hearse? The hearse started up this big hill,” she would say, gesturing with her hands, “and suddenly the back doors of the hearse flew open and the casket tumbled out and slid down the hill and into a

¹ Elizabeth Keating, “The Questions We Don’t Ask Our Families But Should,” *The Atlantic*, Nov. 15, 2022.

corner drugstore. The casket slid to a stop at the counter, the lid popped off and the corpse sat up.” (About this time in the joke, mom would start giggling). “The druggist walked over to the corpse and asked, ‘may I help you sir?’ ‘Yes,’ the corpse replied, ‘do you have anything to stop this coffin?’” By then, you could barely make out the final words because mom was caught up in spasms of laughter.

It didn’t matter, we all knew the punchline; it was mom’s delivery that made it special.

The Akers’ kitchen during those times was a holiday spectacle to behold.

Mounted under the kitchen cabinets was an old am/fm radio—with scratchy reception at best, playing holiday music or classic rock-and-roll, depending on who was dialing in the station. Mom and the girls—my four younger sisters—would begin bumping butts in time with the music.

But oh, the smells that would waft from the kitchen: oven-roasted turkey, ham, mashed potatoes (the real kind), mom’s yummy dressing, yams, baked vegetables, oven-served rolls, chocolate and pumpkin pies—a feast for the palate.

Just one more time I’d like to sit around our table for a holiday meal (all of us), each hand-in-hand as dad prayed over the food.

The table is gone now.

“Sigh.”

Just one more time I’d like to play cards at that kitchen table: hand-and-foot, pinochle, euchre, “three pennies,” or up-and-down-the-river.

A family war with each hand.

I see it now more clearly: so much emotional energy wasted on competitive thoughts.

Just being there with them—in that window of time—is what really mattered. Did I say that to them enough?

Maybe I would view it through a much different set of lenses if I could only play one more game at the table.

My beach stroll down memory lane was two days before Thanksgiving Day this year. Both of my daughters—Kimberly and Bethany—their husbands and six children would arrive tomorrow. Ima had been food shopping for several days. I was eagerly anticipating a special holiday.

I had no idea just how special it would be.

Our first indication that there would be unexpected twists and turns to this year’s holiday gathering was a phone call from Olivia, our granddaughter. “We are sitting in a vehicle outside an Urgent Care,” she said, “mom thinks it may be her kidney stones again. We’ll call back when we know more.”

A couple hours later they were on the road again. The facility had given Kimberly strong pain medicine. They had driven over half-way and were coming in.

Meanwhile, Bethany and Ryan arrived with their three children (Bethany is expecting their fourth child early next year) and settled into a room nearby, on the 14th floor, that we had rented for them.

Kimberly and her crew arrived later that evening. But Kimberly was doubled over in pain: I covered her in prayer.

Despite our efforts the pain refused to go away. Jason took her to the nearest hospital emergency room later that evening, I followed in another car. Jason was exhausted. “Go back and get some sleep, I’ll stay with Kimberly.”

It was Thanksgiving eve. The hospital was short-staffed. Kimberly sat hurting for too long in the corridor of the emergency room.

Eventually a bed cleared in the back. Kimberly was given an IV with fluids and a pain killer. After another long wait, a doctor came by and said Kimberly would be scheduled for surgery in the morning.

On Thanksgiving Day.

That was the bad news. The good news was that the specialist who would be doing the operation was the best surgeon of his kind in the region. He took out the largest of the football-shaped kidney stones and made a way for the others to come out.

That certainly wasn’t the way I had scripted things in my prayers to God.

But it was—though unanticipated—an absolute blessing.

The God of this universe often works in ways we cannot fathom.

At Kimberly’s insistence, we had our Thanksgiving meal later that afternoon. Ima took some food for Kimberly in her hospital room. She was released the day after Thanksgiving.

Of course, the girls went shopping. I took Josh (the “Snapper”), Eden Grace and Jeemes II to watch a special Christmas show at the Alabama Theater. On the next day (Saturday) we enjoyed time together as a family and took a trip down to the beach.

A holiday to remember ...

I often wonder if we have fostered an environment around the holidays that our grandchildren will look back on and cherish.

Just as I whimsically look back on past holidays with mom, dad, my sisters, Aunt Martha, and grandma and grandpa Akers.

Will there be a point in their future—when Ima and I have passed to what lies beyond—where they will say with conviction, “only if I could have one more holiday season with them!”