

The Gifts

That Keep on Giving

I've been celebrating a lot these past few months. Seems like one event carries over to the next, with all offering ripe occasions to dive into a double-decker mocha chip cone or raise a toast of Marlborough sauvignon blanc (my summer favorite) among family and friends. I can tell you this: finding reason to celebrate sure beats the alternative - mourning.

First, my nephew Cooper was born at an impressive 8 pounds, 12 ounces in late February. He's got the most perfect round head and yes, we're all madly in love with him. Then, my 40-year-old brother, Greg, got engaged to his beautiful ladylove in New York City. No one could be more pleased than our Jewish mother, who has been on his case for years, planning dozens of weddings to dozens of girls, all on the first date (but not more than one at a time). "Greg, you've got to get serious," she'd say. Like Teflon, Greg deflected, good-naturedly brushing her off. Congrats, Mom, you kept hope alive, and it paid off.

Spring and summer are also big birthday months for our family. Mine's in early May and the twins' falls later that month. Naturally, the gender disparity between them invites two separate events. Rebecca asked to go bowling with three special friends on her actual birthday and then have three more special friends over for a sleepover the following night. Casey wanted to have a pizza and movie night on a Saturday because "that's cool." He set one other condition, too: to watch *The Spy Next Door* in "the underworld," the cave inhabited by his two teenage brothers. It's the only room in the house with a 50-inch flat-screen television.

"Mom, it will be soooooo fun down there," he pleaded.

"That's fine," I answered, thinking this an especially convenient strategy to excavate the stinky T-shirts, sneakers, candy wrappers and crusted-over plates that otherwise elude me.

In the midst of all this party planning, I celebrated Mother's Day, the successful completion of a long-term consulting project, acceptance to a graduate MFA program for creative nonfiction writing, three new speechwriting assignments and a new oven (by necessity, not choice).



By Nancy Sharp

I even celebrated my 40th birthday again. Four years after the fact.

Let me explain.

My friend Julie and I used to make a girls' getaway every one to two years. Back then, I was living in New York City and Julie was here. I'd been coming to visit her and her family since we were freshmen roommates at Northwestern University. OK, I majored in theater, but based on my rudimentary math skills, that's 26 years. In the time following gradation, I seized any opportunity to come to Colorado - in winter, spring, summer or fall. We'd travel to Vail, Aspen, Crested Butte or Boulder. Sometimes, Julie came east and we'd go to the Berkshires.

Really, it didn't matter where we went or what we did; just being together, the two of us, was transforming. Neither one of us has a sister. We are that to each other.

But then life became more complicated. My first husband got sick with cancer, and it was tricky to maintain this sacred girl time. When all was quiet, I did visit but often felt wiped out. I'm sure I cried a lot, too, even though I came to escape. Later, after Brett died in 2004, these "just for me" excursions were even harder to pull off because I had 3-year-old twins who needed me fiercely in New York City.

Readers know that I recast my life in Denver in 2006. I had just turned 40 and needed breathing space to begin Act 2. Just knowing that Julie and her family were here gave me the confidence to make this bold move on my own.

It so happened that I was visiting Denver around the time of Julie's 40th birthday. But we never did get to truly celebrate until a few months ago. Both of us had just turned 44, and in spite of soccer games, choir practice, tae kwon do, piano, school dioramas, husbands and work, we found ourselves asking, "If not now, when?" It's the same mantra that led me to Colorado.



So, in April my friend and I celebrated our 40th birthdays at the Red Mountain Spa in St. George, Utah. Sure, we were four years late. But three days of hiking, leisurely meals and spa-going made up for lost time. We even got to fulfill a decades-old burger passion. Turns out that St. George has an In-N-Out Burger. We couldn't help but bribe Elliott from the front desk to take us there before we left. He thought we were nuts, but we bought him a burger anyway.

"It's the gift that keeps on giving," says Julie. Not the In-N-Out burger, but celebrating our zero birthdays.

She's right. And yet it's so much more than that. We were celebrating our friendship, and we were celebrating life. After all, there's a lot of history packed into those 26 years, happy memories and unbearably sad ones.

Here's what I've come to believe: It's impossible to pitch the perfect game in life. Sometimes you strike them out and sometimes you give up a home run. Negotiating these ups and downs takes a healthy combination of perspective and resilience.

I've happened upon a little wisdom through all this recent celebrating: Life is far sweeter when you make the time to feast. The grass looks greener and the smell of your children first thing in the morning equals heaven.

Acknowledge those milestones - they matter.

Acknowledge those finite moments - they matter, too.

These are the real gifts that keep on giving. Because one thing I know to be true is that the more you honor your life and the people in it, the more you find there is to celebrate.

Speaking of ... Steve and I just got back from Italy, where we celebrated *his zero* birthday. On time! ☺

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