

Where are we going?

When I was earning a degree in Health Promotion, we were taught to keep in mind assessment and evaluation when we designed a program. It was a circular pattern; on-going and never-ending, always resulting in modifications and improvements. It was book learning though and it was something we hypothetically applied to “others”. I can’t recall a single time when teachers suggested we apply the same principals to our own lives. How easy it is to separate ourselves from the “others”.

It is very easy to get so wrapped up in obligations and even the mundane aspects of life. All of our tasks seem important and necessary. There we are, trudging along, keeping our nose to the grindstone, as my father used to say, and if we are very conscientious, we might risk missing out on life as it passes by. We might forget what the goal was or where we were headed.

Then along comes a child or a songbird or, perhaps, a visitor. And if we are lucky, we look up from our oh-so busy and oh-so important tasks and we recognize an opportunity to see life from a different viewpoint, even if only for a moment. And how refreshing it is to watch that child play or listen to that bird sing or learn from the traveler of other places and other ways of living.

I was just so lucky, one day, many years ago. My sister, Elaine, met Patricia and Bud Kenny and Della, the mule, while in a parking lot in Kingston. In another country, I suppose we would say they were gypsies. They were wandering poets, walking along with their orange safety vests on and eyes alert, while their handsome mule pulled their home. They were looking for a place to settle for the evening and thought they might be headed for a large parking lot in North Plymouth. My sister convinced them that there was no need to visit a parking lot when the lovely Town of Plympton, full of green grass and horse lovers, was right next door.

I had just purchased the best peaches in the world from O’Brien’s peach stand in Halifax and was at Sauchuck’s farm stand buying freshly picked corn when my sister called with her request. Could these people and their mule visit and stay in my yard that night, she wanted to know. I was thrilled and told her, “Of course! Send them over!”

A couple hours later, as I was setting up a hose for Della’s water, I could hear little sounds of excitement, through the pine trees and from down the road. A horn toot, a laugh, a hello. It reminded me of Plympton’s sweet birthday parade. I could feel the excitement in the air that morning and heard this parade before I saw it.

Sure enough, a moment later, a tall man in a straw hat and orange vest walked up my driveway and asked, “Are you Cathy?”

It turned out that my yard has more pine trees than grass and Della really needed more room to graze. A few minutes and a phone call later, my neighbor, Liz, arranged for our visitors to stay at the nearby Colchester Farm. Perfect! I stood in the street and stopped traffic for a moment for a safe turn around. I had to, for most of the cars, I am sorry to say, whizzed by without slowing down for the sake of safety or the pleasure of the moment.

I waved goodbye and looked forward to seeing our guests again. Liz and I looked at each other and laughed. We both saw this as a once in a lifetime opportunity and knew that everything we thought we had to do that day could be rearranged to accommodate this serendipitous gift.

Patricia and Bud are originally from Arkansas. They walked from there to Maine, where they lived for three years, while Bud wrote and built their home on wheels (which has solar panels on top, powering their refrigerator, lights, music and more) and Patricia worked in a cannery. When they were ready and were once again filled with wanderlust, they began walking again.

The Australian aborigines have a coming of age experience for their young men requiring they live off the land, independently, without any assistance for a whole year. For that year, they are known as a “walk about”. There is a terrific movie from 1971 by the same name. Rent it some time and then rent “*Rabbit Proof Fence*” for another reference point on life and spirituality.

I was reminded of the “walk-about” as I watched and listened to and thought about Patricia and Bud. They had made a choice to live a life most people wouldn’t consider for a moment. It’s not as though they have never had possessions or a house attached to the ground. They had. They had responsibilities, too. They had to plan. They were responsible for Della. They had to decide what roads were acceptable for their unique

traveling needs. Roads with soft shoulders of deep sand could be treacherous for their trailer's wheels. These were real needs requiring decisions and action.

While traveling, they met all kinds of people, made observations, wrote poetry, read, enjoyed life and, occasionally performed. I had the privilege of watching one of their performances on top of the rolling meadows of Colchester Farm on that Saturday evening in 2007. Under a glorious blue sky, with a pleasant breeze and barn swallows climbing and swooping over our heads, Bud stood on a stage, (unfolded from the back of his trailer/wagon) and proceeded to keep us all fully engaged. I wasn't the only one who laughed, smiled, shed tears and nodded as you do when you hear words ringing of authentic truth. Patricia read poems and even sang, when reminded of a mule named Sal that walked sixteen miles on the Eerie Canal. It was a magical beautiful evening I shall never forget.

We live in a culture where our most serious health problems are the result of poor choices. We die of complications from diabetes, obesity, lack of exercise and other forms of self-abuse. That means that we have a choice in these matters.

Maybe most people do not want to travel on foot and in a wagon. But what is our choice? Are we actually making choices? Or are we trudging along, worrying about obligations, as though we don't have any choice about them?

Right now, we have the opportunity to speak out and let our voices be heard on our surroundings and our current lifestyle. Do we want to see development right up to the edge of wetlands? Do we want to see the traffic from the hoards of people visiting a proposed casino? We have a choice. We just have to express that choice.

Patricia and Bud Kenny gave many of us pause to think. What is the meaning of life? What choices do we have? What do we want? Where are we headed?

I am still friends with Bud and Patricia on Facebook.

You can visit Patricia and Bud at <http://usonfoot.com/home>

Cathleen Drinan is the Health Agent for the Town of Halifax. She welcomes your comments and suggestions for this column. She can be reached at 781 293 6768 or cathleen.drnan@halifax-ma.org