

1-4-13 Sorting It Out

Making cream of mushroom soup the other day gave me the opportunity to chop, scrape, sort and stir. It was relaxing and meditative. In time, I realized I was thinking back over the year; sometimes with smiles and other times with a shudder.

One of my smiles was in response to remembering the fireflies at the *Just Right Farm*, a local “farm to table” enterprise. It was a beautiful experience, a simplified and friendly yet still dignified version of Babette’s Feast. Upon leaving that wonderful night, the air was filled with fireflies, reminding me that nature needs to be protected, and respected in order for it to be preserved and enjoyed. May *Just Right Farm* continue to honor nature by introducing us to her!

Nature isn’t always kind, though, as proven by Super Storm Sandy, the Katrina of the East Coast. We will be hearing more about climate change in 2013, as scientists such as Kevin Trenberth, a senior scientist at the National Center for Atmospheric Research have been telling us that “warmer oceans, result in stronger hurricanes”. Talk about mushrooming consequences!

Cleaning the mushrooms with a dry paper towel reminded me, with a sigh, of the actions involved in my lead paint cases. In the end, dust wipes are used as one test for the completion of the de-leading work. I sighed as I thought of the many times I went to court over one lead paint case. Perseverance is needed when it comes to protecting children from lead poisoning. Understanding of that importance is needed on the part of the owner.

Looking back, the necessity and importance of understanding and awareness became the theme of the year. It applied to other housing issues and so many other events. Awareness and understanding of the importance of protecting our ground water, of best management practices for preventing harmful nutrients from entering surface waters and the appreciation of the rewards of working together grew throughout the year with the formation of the Monponsett Watershed Association. They’ve done an outstanding job and are quietly busy gearing up for the spring arrival of our green enemy: ALGAE. Despite the public health threat of ugly algae, the MWA makes me smile with pride.

Primordial soup is where the mosquitoes lay their eggs and last year the soup was just right, apparently, as it was an off the chart year for both Eastern Equine Encephalitis (EEE) and West Nile virus (WNV). My heart goes out to the families who lost loved ones as a result. On the whole, I’d say that people have a better appreciation of the importance of their own personal protection measures and their responsibility to use them, as there is no silver bullet against mosquitoes. In fact, the battle against the bugs on the state and national level is at a tipping point, considering budget cuts that will result in more deaths from these diseases. The other tipping point is the building opposition to the use of pesticides. I hope that reason will prevail. It makes more sense to take the pesticides off the shelves for the public than to remove the possibility of less than an ounce of sumethrin (Anvil™) per acre for aerial applications in times of emergency with EEE. I also hope for research resulting in eco-friendly solutions, but research takes

motivation and money. My hat goes off in respect and gratitude to the staff at our mosquito control programs and the infectious disease investigators at our Department of Public Health. They are taking the time to look again at old data in new ways and new approaches to old problems. I thank them.

Sadly, we lost (through his resignation) our State Commissioner of Public Health, John Auerbach, in response to the by one “scientist” described by Auerbach as a “single rogue chemist”, referring to Annie Dookhan, who worked at the Framingham State Lab. The costly consequences of Ms. Dookhan’s mishandling of criminal investigation evidence is a debacle that will continue for a very long time, as criminals are released from jail as their attorneys demand a mistrial. Others may have been wrongly sent to jail because of false evidence. Who knows when and for whom justice is being served when this happens? Out of this shameful situation better checks and balances for all laboratories will arise. Those best management practices must be followed in order to save lives.

Unfortunately, the state lab is not the only one where checks and balances were not enforced. The contamination of steroid injection drugs prepared at the New England Compounding Center resulted in a multi-state outbreak of fungal infections resulting in 656 cases, hundreds of serious conditions, such as strokes and 39 deaths (according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, aka, CDC). This is a preventable calamity!

In the wrong hands, drugs are like guns and, when misused by out-of-balance people, they are both potentially deadly, as seen in the tragic and devastating massacre of children and teachers in Newtown, CT. A thread of mental illness runs through these 2012 catastrophes. I hope the future brings improvements in the care of the mentally ill, recognition of their needs in the long run and the connection between crime and mental illness. Dare I hope that people will someday have to prove their mental stability in order to own a gun and dare I hope that semi-automatic weapons will not be available outside of police and military use?

Yes, I do hope. Hope is chicken soup for the soul, even when it has been difficult to sort it out.

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