

**Laura Sturza, Writing Samples**

# The Boston Globe

CONNECTIONS | MAGAZINE

## **As a first-time bride at age 53, I knew my husband and I were starting our ‘forever’ late**

Our time together would be shorter, so we’d have to make the most of it, starting with our wedding day.

**By Laura Sturza** February 10, 2023

My husband and I married when I was 53 and he was 61. We knew we wouldn’t get to have and to hold one another for the same “forever” my sister and brother-in-law had already enjoyed for 39 years of marriage, and counting. We wouldn’t have the 53 years my parents shared before Dad died.

Our time together would be shorter. So, I was bent on making the most of it, especially on our wedding day. I hoped our guests would tap into all the love in their own lives — and dream of more ahead. For me and Tom, I imagined the sounds, textures, words, and embraces of the day would stay with us into our future. I wanted it all to last in the way our marriage would last.

Tom knew he was marrying a timekeeper. My obsession with tracking the hours left in each day means I’ve never stopped wearing wristwatches, even as others began using phones to tell them when they could leave work or how much longer until they’d see their beloved.



Illustration by Megan Lam

A few years ago, I bought an elegant brand from Denmark in a sleek, modern design, made of my favorite metal — silver. The one I currently wear has a face in cat's-eye green. It is so beautiful I convince myself I'm gazing at it to take in the details of its careful construction. But the real reason is to parse the number of minutes left for crucial matters, like whether I can fit in a call to Mom just before my doctor's appointment.

I bought a beautiful new watch for the wedding — white with glimmering crystals on each hour.

I didn't look at it once that day. There was no need to oversee time — it had stopped. Our guests may have had obligations before the ceremony, or a child to fetch afterward. But as the bride, I forgot an agenda ever existed. For once, my watch was only an accessory, not a meter of my experience. It was as if I didn't know the day would end.

I was stunned when it did. I yearned for more wedding dances and a chance to go back and sit at each table, to talk with every guest. I wanted more minutes to listen to them tell me about their weddings, about the things our ceremony had stirred up in them, about hoped-for future romances.

It was too much to take in on a single day. So, I absorbed what I could, knowing that in the years ahead I would recall all that grace. Especially when I'd have to rise to the hard moments in marriage, the ones I couldn't imagine on our wedding day. I trusted that, later, I could review what I'd missed in the extraordinary blur of that day, details captured by our photographer and videographer, who froze us in those moments, in all our middle-aged glory.

On our wedding day, Tom and I embraced our symbolic role by committing to love *for eternity*. As bride and groom, we were ageless, timeless. We were not done with love, even at our age. *Especially* not at our age.

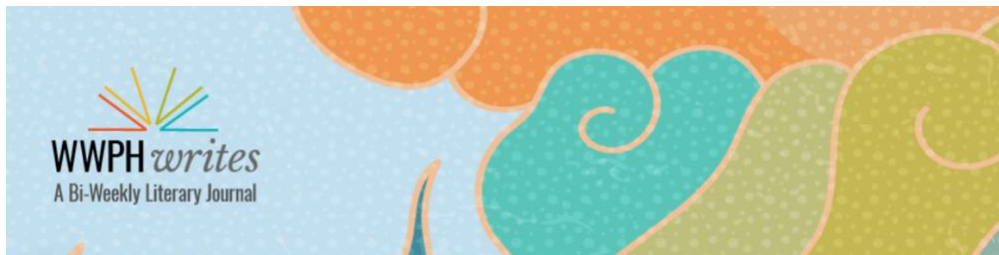
The photos and videos remind me how present I was that day. Tom's ability to live in the moment comes easily to him. It takes more effort for me, with my tendency to worry over a renovation project or a flight reservation. But not on the day we married.

In the seven years since our wedding, I've learned the clock does not motivate Tom the way it does me. His unhurried pace can annoy me when I'm in my usual rush. But more often he inspires me to dabble at modeling myself after him.

Sometimes I even believe there is no shortage of time with him. I can keep my eyes from checking my watch for reassurance, trusting that what we have is exactly enough.

Laura Sturza is a writer in Rockville, Maryland.

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## I COULD CARE LESS

By Laura Sturza

I could care less. I could, but usually, I care far too much. About everything. On a given day, picking up the dry cleaning can take on monumental proportions. And that's not even factoring in concerns of real consequence, like visiting a sick friend. Priorities, deadlines, and urgent matters (many self-imposed), are regular elements of my daily life.

I've been entertaining the idea that this business of caring too much is merely clickbait I haven't been able to resist. I wonder what would happen if I swapped in my over-developed fretting skills. Will better qualities fill the space?

What do carefree people have that I don't? With this question, my investigation is underway.

The first guide on my path to a carefree lifestyle is self-help guru Dane Arnick, appearing on a tacky local talk show. The guy has some charisma, though, in the steady, soft-spoken way that attracts those inclined to personal growth. He wears simple khakis, a white T-shirt, and a linen sport jacket. Either he's native Californian or wants to be.

I'm comfortable wearing khakis and a white T-shirt. It's one of my favorite uniforms. I imagine that if I swathe myself in easy-wear garments, their essence will infiltrate my core. But my little plot hasn't worked. My interior life isn't like an uncluttered Calvin Klein ad. It's more of an upscale thrift shop, with lots of nice items displayed erratically.

Dane tells viewers, "The things we focus on are the ones we get good at doing. If we spend our time worrying, we'll become expert worriers but no better skilled at preventing our fears from coming true."

Great idea. Unfortunately, stopping isn't easy.

My work as a journalist gives me a chance to try an anti-stress tactic he mentioned. My article is mostly written, but those last-minute touch-ups are driving me mad.

The tight coil that's lodged itself in my neck gets my attention. So, I follow a friend's suggestion and pretend I'm the kind of employee who gives 60% to the job—lopping off the extra 40% I usually add on. With that, I file the story as is and get positive reviews from the editor. Still, that one paragraph dogs me. Could've been better. But by testing out the 60% method, I'm making progress.

A friend who's celebrating her recovery birthday takes me to her AA meeting. I find I identify with people who chased down drinks with the same fervor I have for getting through every item on my to-do list.

They introduce themselves with, "Hi, my name is \_\_, and I'm an alcoholic." My version? "Hi, my name is Laura, and I'm a compulsive over-complicator/overthinker/over-doer." (I can't even produce a simpler

tagline).

While working on another article, I interview a man who successfully started his own company. I contemplate my prospects of taking on a similar enterprise. I have a theory about what it takes to be a CEO. I imagine a person who considers the facts presented to them by their crack staff and makes decisions without much hand-wringing.

Slightly different from my process. If I'm choosing between turquoise and raspberry sweatpants, many factors must be considered. Which color is more likely to get dirty? Does one pair enhance my assets better than the other? How does each pair complement my other clothes?

As anyone can see, it would be tough for me to manage a major corporation.

Another day, I'm at lunch with my friend Reggie. Her forehead isn't scrunched up anymore, her jaw is relaxed. After eight years of sweating it out toward her goal of writing for TV, she just doesn't care anymore. When I tell her she looks great, she just smiles and thanks me. My admiration doesn't seem to faze her. In her Zen-like state, even compliments are unimportant.

The concept of *making it* is no longer part of her rating system. "If it happens, great. If not, I'm still alright," she says and seems to mean it. I find myself fascinated. And happy for her. And I want whatever she's taking.

When my penchant for dreaming up catastrophes persists, I conjure up a lovely older woman I knew years ago, Goldie. If I was getting all worked up about making travel plans or burning a side dish, she was so good at offering me kindness when I'd call her up. "My dear girl, you don't have to figure it all out," she'd say. "You're sure to find something that interests you as much as worrying has. Just wait and see."

As I consider her message again now, I think, *wait and see? Great. So now I'm supposed to be patient as well as carefree? If this takes, I'll be virtually unrecognizable.*

And yet, with so many guides on my path to a more easygoing lifestyle, my aspiration to take breathers from my overly ambitious nature has started to sink in. There are moments I feel like I do when I'm on trips to the beach, with nothing but a lighthearted book, a huge jug of ice water, and a dish of ripe mangoes. The sun is hot on me; the fruit's sweet smell is loosened. I feel an odd sensation like I'm ready for anything. Ready even for nothing. And I could care less which way it goes.

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## shondaland

### Why I Searched for Love in Thrift Store Aisles

By Laura Sturza JUNE 7, 2022

Working at my family's antique business in Maryland took fortitude, which I developed at an early age during morning jaunts to yard sales and late nights hawking goods at my

mother's antique shows. Sorting out the goodies from the toss-offs and closing sales on the trinkets customers wavered over buying required true discernment.

By 10 years old, *The Washington Post* had published my photo and dubbed me "possibly the youngest" dealer at a D.C. antique show. My family and I spent weekends hunting down beautiful objects at estate sales, yard sales, flea markets, and thrift shops in the 1960s and '70s. Mom and I lined up early to be the first ones in. We came armed with wicker picnic baskets to load up with our finds.

When the doors opened at 9 o'clock, I was off— sprinting through jam-packed houses and churches quicker than any slow-moving adult. I may have been only a kid, but I was already a seasoned pro. I could spot collectibles, like an original wooden Crazy Cat statue (paid \$1, sold for \$12) or a Donald Duck rubber squeeze toy (paid 50 cents, sold for \$8.50).

When I was old enough, my interest shifted from first-edition books to Alex, the eighth-grade skateboarder who was a year ahead of me. He never noticed me, but I kept hoping I would meet a guy who appreciated the offbeat yard sale finds I wore.

Unfortunately, rummaging through other people's rejected stuff had an adverse impact on my social life. I dressed like no one else in junior high, wearing a '50s burgundy blazer one day and a gauzy skirt with beaded necklaces the next. I loved those clothes. In retrospect, they must have looked more like costumes than the bell-bottoms and Fleetwood Mac T-shirts worn by my peers.

As an adult, I was convinced there was someone who would want to love me like the loot I discovered. *As is*. That hope carried me through years of dates near my new home in Los Angeles with men whose online profiles embellished their careers, hobbies, ages, physiques, and availability for relationships.

I realized during my lengthy dating crusade as a middle-aged woman that my childhood job had not only given me the ability to sort out lovers who weren't right for me, but also the confidence to believe my own sales spiel, even when marketing the personal goods I could offer a prospective mate. I decided that one of my chief selling points was the quirky persona I developed, enhanced by the one-off outfits scored on buying sprees. I'd grown to embrace that identity as a grown-up despite the fact it hadn't won the hearts of my teenage crushes.

I outgrew my interest in the family business, but I never lost my passion for trolling thrift shops. Although my taste in clothes had gone more mainstream, I could still pull off wearing a pleated Catholic schoolgirl's skirt. I paired it with a white T-shirt, pearls, and loafers. No one would have guessed who wore that skirt before I got it. I imagined I'd meet my man at the Humane Society thrift store. I'd be waiting for the dressing room. He would join the line, both of us drunk with expectation over our incredible finds. But he never turned up on my thrifting adventures.

I met more than 100 possibilities during my online dating odyssey. Instead of digging through cluttered garages like I did when scoping out valuable tchotchkes, I ventured out to coffee shops on those first dates in search of a personal gem — a husband. Why couldn't my ability for scouting top-notch merchandise help me track down *my* man?



Though my nonconforming nature had kept me from getting very far in Girl Scouts, during my dating quest, I harbored the wish I could have earned badges sewn to a sash across my chest. It would have featured the embroidered image of every guy I'd met, including the insomniac drummer, the interrupting professor, and the man living aboard an abandoned vintage train. My ability to find beauty in castaway clothes of assorted styles, eras, and cultures had made me less inclined to have a particular type of man in mind.

Lest anyone think I'm making up the numbers, I kept copious records of the 100 men I met: the ones I liked who ghosted me, the ones who asked for second dates after I strained to get through the first one, and the ones who didn't align with my ethics, views, or humor. While some might label me fussy, I had refined my sense of discernment during years of antiquing. Having passed my last self-imposed marriage deadline at age 45, I wasn't about to settle for whatever man looked shiny on the surface.

Eventually, I unearthed Tom, a liberal-minded bureaucrat who favored button-down shirts and trousers for work. Other days, he put his well-made, 6-foot body into running gear for jogs. He sported jeans only for playing keyboards and taking me to comedy clubs. While his look was interchangeable with other L.A. city employees, in this case, a standout appearance was not what got my attention.

When he talked, Tom didn't hold back his affection for his coworkers, his adult daughters, and his friends. And when I met his dog and saw the way they couldn't take their eyes off each other — at least when Tom wasn't eyeing me — I realized I wanted to affix myself to Tom's lap as much as his 10-pound Bichon poodle did.

On our first dates, he asked me questions about my past job as a journalist and how it had made me appreciate the city hall employees I covered. He wanted to know why yoga had beat out dancing as my favorite movement pursuit. And he learned how I could never live without cats. Luckily, that last one didn't put him off. If anything, it confirmed we were both suckers for animals.

A few weeks after we met, he was intrigued to learn where I got some of my best-looking clothes. That's when I took my novice thrift shopper to Goodwill. In 15 minutes, I'd gathered three pairs of jeans and two brightly colored shirts for him, plus two T-shirts for me. We squeezed into an open dressing room (defying the rules for sharing one) for our first joint fashion show. My stylish man left with all five items for a whopping \$18.95. He was sold — on thrift shopping *and* on me.

I found my most prized treasure buried under a pile of men who were not the right fit for me. I realized my childhood career had schooled me in separating the knock offs from the jewels. It all paid off when I landed the ultimate find: my husband, Tom. He is a man with perfect recall for details about things that delight him, like the steal he got at Value Village on the Levi's and the red plaid shirt he's wearing today.

*Laura Sturza is a Rockville, Maryland-based writer who has contributed to The Washington Post, Los Angeles Times, The Girlfriend from AARP, and Los Angeles magazine.*

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## The Washington Post

### **I won clown contests as a kid. It didn't win me friends, but it showed me I could do anything.**

I won several in the D.C. area and was even recognized by Willard Scott in 1970

By Laura Sturza

November 28, 2020

My mother's over-the-top optimism never stops. While I sometimes wish she would scale it back, I dearly appreciate the woman I call my Moptimist. I suspect her capacity to bright-side anything is one reason for her longevity. Mom just turned 95.

Sometimes her cockeyed fantasies about me come true. When I was growing up in Silver Spring, Md., she helped turn me into an award-winning clown when I was 6 with the elaborate Halloween costume she made for me. That experience later sustained my belief that I still had a chance of getting married for the first time, though I was nearly 50. I wondered if I might be more successful in romance if I applied the same attitude I learned as a child competing in clown contests.



At Rock Creek Forest Elementary School, I hoped to get the attention I yearned for from classmates who disliked my nonconforming nature. At the school's Halloween parade in the late 1960s, the other kids mostly had store-bought costumes, such as [Casper the Friendly](#)



[Ghost](#) and [Underdog](#). My handmade costume featured neon green, yellow and blue stripes, with orange pompoms up the front.

When I was in first grade, Mom entered me in my first clown contest at Lansburgh's Department Store's Clown Breakfast. Some of the other kids had even more extravagant costumes than mine, with wire rigging underneath so they looked heavier, and makeup designs that surely took hours to apply.

Over scrambled eggs and toast in a room full of clown children and their watchful moms, I fessed up to my fear. "I don't think my costume is going to win, Mom," I said.

"Go up to that clown emcee and joke around with him," she told me.

I wasn't crazy about the idea, but I did what I had to do, hoping I might at least get an honorable mention. Fortified by a sugar rush from a big glass of orange juice, I approached Larry the Emcee.

"Hey, Big Feet," I said. "Where do you shop for shoes?"

I was relieved when he looked at me with a kind face that showed through under his makeup.

"A costume store in Kensington," he said.

Mom's trick worked. I won the "best personality" award, a small trophy with a Polaroid photo of me and Larry affixed to the back of it.

As time went on, we embellished my costume. At a Kmart Blue Light Special, I found a pair of red, white and blue suede shoes with white leather stars on each side. I loved them so much I wore them as everyday shoes. The other kids did not respond well. They wrote a song that resounded across the playground.

"Look who's on the monkey bars, Bozo, Bozo, look who's on the monkey bars, Bozo the Clown."

Mom defended my shoes when I came home crying. "The other kids just don't recognize standout accessories," she said.

If I could not claim close childhood friendships, at least I could boost myself up by accruing awards. I entered a second contest in third grade and wrote about "why I want to be clown for a day at Ringling Brothers Circus." In this contest, the prize was tickets to the circus for your whole family.

Mom and I were driving on a beautiful spring day when D.C. radio personality Willard Scott, who even played [Bozo the Clown](#), read my name on air.

"Today's contest winner is Laura Sturza. She wrote: 'You can be outrageous at the circus. When everyone laughs at you, it feels great. The audience loves you for being an oddball. That's why I want to be Ringling Brothers Circus's clown for a day.'"

Mom pulled over by the side of Little Falls Road. We got out and hugged and danced. I had won. I had beaten out the bullies who sang the Bozo song to me in nasty voices.

The next day, Mom called my teacher, Mrs. Skolnick, who had sent me to the principal's office enough times. I can guess how the conversation between my teacher and my mother went.

"Of course there have been some struggles for Laura," Mom would have said, "but this is such great news. I hope you'll share it with the school as an example of what all kids can do when they use their talents."

I picture Mrs. Skolnick, maybe too busy to attend to this, knowing she had announced other students' successes. I cringed, imagining how my classmates would take it.

"You'll see," Mom promised. "It's going to be great."



The next morning, the principal herself announced the celebrity news over the public address system, just after reminding us that inoculations would take place the next week.

“WRC radio picked one of our own students as their clown for a day, Laura Sturza,” Principal Rosenberg said. “By writing an award-winning essay, she and her family will be guests at the Ringling Brothers Circus.”

To celebrate my success, I wore my tri-colored shoes to school again that day. Mom's pep talks had made me immune to mean comments from classmates. That day, other children looked at me differently. A popular kid who had never noticed me before stopped me in the hallway. He was even from the next grade up.

“Bozo, right?” he said. “That's cool. When you going to the circus?”

He thought I was cool! I was so excited I couldn't muster any better response than: “Next weekend.”

As an adult, I developed a more realistic view of my mother's belief that “I can do anything.” And while I didn't exactly tone down my enthusiasm, I learned to rein in some of the overeager behaviors that had made me unpopular in my youth. But I could still tap into my mom's fervent optimism when faced with what seemed like an unattainable goal — finding a life partner for the first time as a middle-aged woman.

Soon after I turned 50, my mother watched me marry the kindhearted man who was ready to spend his life with a former Maryland clown contest champion. Little did I know that Tom would come to love my mother, Evelyn, almost as much as I do. Two years after our wedding, we uprooted ourselves from our much-loved home in Los Angeles. We moved to Maryland to be closer to her, and to the scene of the successes she helped engineer as a proud clown-stage mom.

Looking back on the sometimes deflating process of dating for decades, I relied on the mantra Mom laid out for me early on. I said it to myself often when preparing for first dates.

“I can do anything,” I told myself. “After all, I'm a prizewinning clown.”



## How I Got Married For The First Time After 50

By realizing my family's history was thwarting me.

By Laura Sturza  
November 20, 2020

Plenty of factors contributed to my status as a never-married woman in my late 40s, but perhaps the most glaring was perfectionism. It was a trait I had learned from my parents, whose search for their dream home lasted 25 years, a record I would hold up



photo Serena Montenegro Jensen

against any other impossible-to-please customers. Every weekend and holiday, they'd drag me through open houses. A rotating cast of Realtors would lead us through property after property. It was a Goldilocks adventure of grand proportions, in search of a house that wasn't too big or too small. I wasn't sure they would ever find one that was just right.

I begged my parents to take me anywhere but another stupid open house, but they weren't listening. Instead, they were keenly attuned to yet another poor Realtor's vain attempts to have them "imagine this living room with a fresh coat of eggshell paint and a beige, plush carpet." Sometimes I stood in the adjacent room, silently imitating the agent, gesturing to show my customers just how perfect their new home would be once it was filled with my buyer's personal touches.

Other times, I'd wander into the kids' rooms wondering who lived in them. There was one bedroom in a rambler house (I had absorbed all the pertinent real estate lingo) that surely belonged to a cool girl. Her walls were already painted blue, my favorite color that year, and the central feature was a poster of David Cassidy, my biggest crush. But, my parents didn't like the fact that it had no garage and the price point was a tad too high. So, of course, the room never became mine.

Time marched on, and the turquoise, mid-century stoves gave way to 1970s avocado colored refrigerators. My daydreams turned from David Cassidy to real boys. But by now, my parents' perfectionism and penchant for unrealistic expectations had seeped into my being. I was writing up wish lists of my own, rejecting boy after boy the way Mom and Dad rejected homes. I'd refuse to give the go-ahead to a man with fewer attractive features than I sought.

One day, my parents finally bought a house at auction. It was one of the ugliest homes I'd ever seen – with a black, Mansard roof, reminiscent of a barn. The clunky and unwelcoming property was among six homes sold by a developer who had overshot his goals. I was horrified. I couldn't imagine bringing a prospective boyfriend to this house for one of my fantasy make-out sessions (since I had yet to have an actual boyfriend). But my parents had finally worn themselves down, and could revel in what they

considered the house's perfection: they got it at 35% below market rate, which was their definition of beauty.

My teenage years were spent under that roof, until I escaped the house for college. From there it was my single 20s, which slipped into my unmarried 30s. When I reached my 40s, it hit me: my parents' impossible expectations had turned me into as much of a lookyloo with men as they had been with houses. Like my folks, I had harbored the illusion that if I held out long enough, every item on my wish list would come true.

From that moment on, I made it my mission to locate my mate, and quickly. To find, not the man with every perfect quality on my list, but the man with at least one perfect quality from the top of my list. I picked kindness. Once that decision was made, time was of the essence. I just had to let go of my parents' blueprint for unearthing a house, then I could be married soon after turning 50.

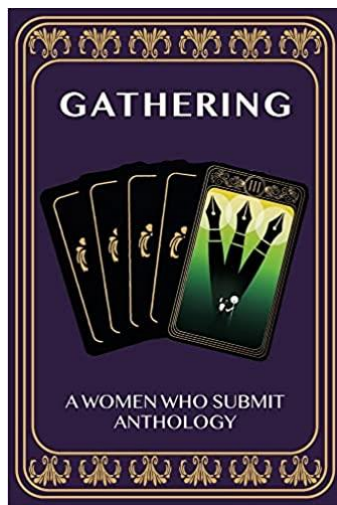
With my friends' help, I created a standout, online profile, comparable to the best real estate ad. I made sure my personal "foundation" was in the best possible shape. To do this, I tapped into an extensive network of trusted "interior designers": friends, yoga teachers and spiritual advisors, who helped me unclutter emotional barriers that had kept me from finding my mate, including perfectionism.

It worked, and I now share life with my husband Tom in a beautiful home we recently purchased. We bought it, by the way, in less than six months.

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### **A Nun and a Pop Star: How I'm Making it Through the Pandemic**

Published November 2021 in the book *Gathering: A Women Who Submit Anthology*



In our new, stay-at-home lifestyle, my familiar foundations have been shaken loose, my experience of time and space radically altered, and the daily mix of anxiety, grief and tenderness

makes me yearn to reconnect with far-flung friends from different eras of my life, blurring the lines between past and present.

In these uncertain days of the pandemic, I have found an unlikely pair of spiritual guides to help me through it: American Buddhist nun Pema Chödrön and Madonna. Since the lockdown began, the words of these two completely different, but very powerful personalities — a nun and a pop star — have coaxed me into a more expansive frame of mind. This eases isolation and provides the ability to exist in two places at once — my current home in Rockville, Maryland, and my former hometown, Los Angeles.

In 2017, my husband and I moved from L.A. to Maryland to help care for my mother, who needed some extra help. Doing so was a great decision. But three years later, the potent forces that attract wannabee stars to L.A. still pull me back. The city, with its extraordinary mash-up of architectural designs, relentless sun and indie movies at Laemmle Theaters, held an allure that kept me there for 20 years. But if my sadness over leaving the West Coast was only about cultural and natural attractions, D.C. can go head to head with Los Angeles. For example, by leaving drought-ridden L.A. I was ecstatic when I got drenched in my first East Coast rainstorm, even though I had just seen my fabulous new D.C. hairdresser. And before the lockdown started, I could add the free museums, the fragility of Cherry Blossoms, and Rock Creek Park to the DMV's calling cards.

Those lifestyle elements matter, but it was the people I left behind in Southern California that caused me heartbreak. Since our move, we had taken semi-annual trips back to L.A. But now that we are all stay-at-home people, I have had to find another way to visit; and here are where the nun and the pop star come in.

Pema Chödrön outlines the practice of loving-kindness in her book *The Places That Scare You, A Guide to Fearlessness in Difficult Times*. “We begin by engendering loving-kindness for ourselves and then expand it at our own pace to include loved ones, friends, “neutral” persons, those who irritate us, all of the above as a group, and finally, all beings through time and space.”

I realized I could embrace Chödrön's concept of loving-kindness by experiencing myself with everyone I care about at once — equally with those in California and Maryland. And expanding further, I can tap into my connection to people around the world, human beings on every continent facing the same fears, uncertainties, and moments of grace that I am.

But just as I have found respite in Chödrön's philosophy, I have also turned to a more earthly source to facilitate my spiritual cross-country travels — Madonna's song, *Hollywood*. Ever since I moved back east, this bouncy tune has captivated me, connecting with my former West Coast life by dancing along to it. But since adjusting to our new, distanced way of life, Madonna's song has taken on a deeper meaning for me. I walked in Maryland on one blissfully sunny, spring afternoon, playing it over and over.

*There's something in the air in Hollywood  
The sun is shining like you knew it would  
You're riding in your car in Hollywood  
You got the top down and it feels so good*

Listening to it, I realized it makes me feel like I am now as much in Hollywood as I am in Rockville. And while I'm extremely pleased that we moved closer to Mom, I have come to realize I might never fall out of love with Los Angeles. Because, while it's easy enough for me to feel at home in either city, I am now 2,700 miles from people with whom I'd forged deep friendships for two decades.

But now none of us can socialize outside of our homes. Now we are all finding new ways to be close, no matter where we live. Like me, many of my friends have family members providing essential services in hospitals and elsewhere on the front lines. Together, we hold our breath hoping those we love have the immunity they need to sustain themselves. I hold each of these people close in my heart, write love notes, stay tethered.

In spite of it all, even while staying in our homes, and in between crying jags about the devastation this pandemic is causing, I am determined to welcome moments of joy. I have found that our hearts can connect in ways that make time and distance less relevant. And in our beautifully intertwined world, I can picture Pema Chödrön and Madonna on a Zoom meeting, laying down beats for their first single together. I can hardly wait for it to drop.

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## **How My Older Cats Taught Me About Life. Really!**

More and more, I've aspired to follow their lead.

**AARP's *The Ethel***

By Laura Sturza



When my husband and I married seven years ago, he agreed to a package deal. I came with two middle-aged cats I had adopted long before our wedding. Tom and I were middle-aged, too. He was 61. I was 53 (11 and 9 in cat years). I couldn't ride into my golden years with a man who was cat averse. Felines are essential for my mental health.

What I never expected was that learning to accept the eccentricities and challenges that developed during Lulu and Moki's twilight years would teach me how to live with my husband's peccadillos (and mine) as *we* grew older.

Certainly, there are reasons it's simpler to love and forgive a cat than a person. A study at Washington State University points out that just 10 minutes of petting an animal can reduce the stress hormone cortisol. In fact, the benefit of feline companionship goes far beyond that for a middle-aged woman's well-being.

Could I bring the unconditional love my cats inspire in me, to Tom, a man who admits he only hears 25 percent of what I say, 30 percent on a good day? Women's communication skills give us an advantage over men in building stronger relationships with felines. According to professor Michael Nappier, DVM, of the Virginia-Maryland College of Veterinary Medicine:

“Women tend to be better at interpreting or perceiving others’ feelings” and they “take the time to pick up nonverbal communication.” Which isn’t to say there aren’t men who love felines, too. Tom certainly is one of them, as is Nappier. “I love working with cats,” he adds. “I am the resident crazy cat dude.”

Cats and their sweet purring and soft cuddles can even make you live longer, according to a study published in the *Journal of Vascular and Interventional Neurology*. Researchers found a link between owning a cat and a decreased risk of dying from a heart attack or stroke. And, as any cat owner knows, the vibration and sound of a purring cat can calm the nerves, something the study also noted.

Like many people, I relied on my cats more during the COVID lockdown. I worried they suffered from excessive quarantine cat-handling syndrome, though they never complained. I had time to notice that Lulu’s elegant appearance showed signs of advancing years. She developed a touch of gray on her scruff. I thought it was beautiful, like all the swirls on her lovely tabby coat. I didn’t always feel the same about my own graying locks, but I figured if I could accept the beauty of aging in my cats, why not in myself? Even Tom encouraged me to grow out my silver hair, and I came to appreciate my own shimmering, natural color.

When Moki reached an age that he could have qualified for a senior discount, his neurotic behavior spiked. At times, he would bolt out the door, yowl and attack Lulu. Though mostly, Moki was an incredibly sweet little guy. He often wanted the ultrasoft fur on his belly rubbed. So, I loved him madly and took the misbehavior he sometimes dished out. Shelly Volsche, a professor at Boise State University who studies human and animal bonding, explained why that might be the case. She says cats “help alleviate loneliness, because you have somebody there to whom you can speak, you can play with, you can snuggle.”

I suspect my forgiving attitude toward Moki’s annoying behaviors helped soften my response to some of Tom’s maddening ways, like leaving all the travel planning up to me.

While my cats have taught me plenty, Tom has also shown me a thing or two. Early in our relationship, we had a bad spat. As usual, it was about something he didn’t follow up on that I asked him to do. OK, perhaps I pestered him about this unfinished task too many times.

Instead of shutting me out, our short-lived tiff inspired him to play me a George Burns and Gracie Allen song, “I Love Her, That’s Why.” It’s a tune in which the couple recount one another’s foibles with such sweetness that I imagined Tom and I could have a long, happy partnership like theirs — and that I shouldn’t pester him so much.

More and more, I’ve aspired to follow Lulu’s lead. Her graceful, low-key nature has stayed the same since her kitten years. But even she’s had her share of misdeeds, like tracking litter box pawprints on the dining table. In the same way I accept that Tom doesn’t always swiftly do what I ask, I took Lulu’s dining table adventures as part of her charm.

Nappier confirmed that people can still build positive relationships with cats who have bad habits. “For a cat that has challenging mannerisms and maybe is a bully ... it’s still a valuable thing [to own a cat],” he says. “Particularly for individuals who are getting older or maybe have a risk of feeling isolated or lonely. And, all of those cats I’ve ever met, they still have redeeming qualities.”

That’s also true for spouses because, admittedly, I’m not always easy to get along with either. I can be as high-strung as Moki.

Fortunately, like our felines, Tom and I have more positive traits than drawbacks. We appreciate one another’s warmheartedness. We’re each other’s biggest fans. And we can thank Moki and Lulu for helping me get ready for marriage. “People have said that having a cat is like



preparing to live with someone, because cats do things on their terms," Nappier says.

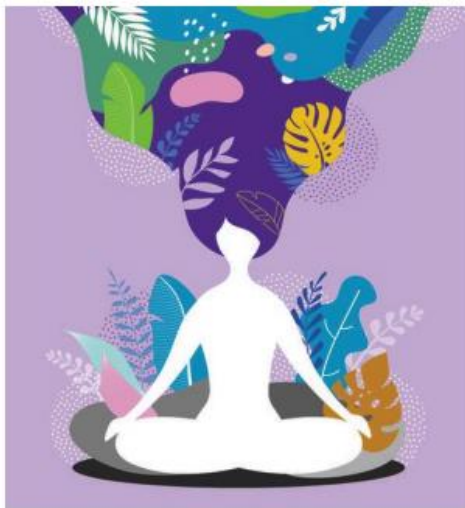
While older adults are sometimes portrayed as unable to learn new tricks, Tom and I make compromises to build our imperfectly happy union. We adapt to one another's less-appealing qualities, just as we do with our cats. And I get those same feel-good hormones that come from petting kitties when Tom and I share the couch, watching the hysterical *Schitt's Creek*.

For me to age with Lulu's grace means I don't hold out hopes that my husband will suddenly start organizing his computer files. And it's unlikely I'll ever stop being so blunt. As with our cats, we embrace being together — as we are.

## How I got to 'Om' and a calmer mind

MEDITATE, THEY URGED. I TRIED FOR YEARS. IN 2020, IT FINALLY IS PAYING OFF

BY LAURA STURZA



ROSS MAY Los Angeles Times/Getty Images

I've spent enough time chasing peace to know a good percentage of us meditator types are habitually frazzled. We're working every angle to eke out moments of reprieve. Before following stay-at-home orders, if I was late for yoga class, or rushing around to holiday parties or gift shopping, heaven had to help other drivers when I was barreling along Ventura Boulevard to get my serenity on.

Let's just say meditation and I have history. Initially, I was among those who didn't want any part of it. I spent my 20s and 30s embracing a turbocharged lifestyle and wasn't keen on smoothing out my edges.

Yet bizarrely, I kept signing up for meditation, usually along with yoga at my favorite San Fernando Valley studios. I must have known something good would come from it.

I accidentally started practicing yoga 25 years ago at a friend's suggestion. She lured me into it, reminding me she met her husband in class. At first, I went grudgingly, though I liked



learning that yogis refer to themselves as “practitioners.” It means we’ll never be perfect at it; we’ll just keep practicing.

As a recovering perfectionist, it was a relief to learn I’d never be proficient at calming down.

My passion for nonstop activity meant that while I embraced the movement segments of yoga, I could barely tolerate the meditative sequences, especially the final resting pose, when we lie on our backs and relax.

For years, my mind responded with “When will this end? Should I get sushi for dinner?” My thoughts could even turn on me with lines like, “Can’t you hit the off switch, even for a minute?” Sometimes I bolted from the resting pose before class was over, disrupting my classmates.

As it turns out, the years I’ve spent in hot pursuit of a calmer state have had a positive effect. My mom says I’m not short with her anymore. My husband isn’t chided quite as strongly when he accidentally deletes the entire series of my favorite TV show.

Since I no longer clunk my way out of class early, my fellow students don’t side-eye me through their meditation.

My practice has certainly come in handy during the pandemic. My body remains more flexible, helping soften my shoulders when they crunch up over the latest California COVID-19 statistics. My busy mind has a fade-out knob that helps me ignore political bickering. Although I can still push back on the whole “quieting my mind” business, in 2020 I started attending my little meditation group more often.

Even so, my interior world frequently reverts to its native, anxious posture; so I keep taking another turn on my yoga mat, another crack at my entirely imperfect meditation practice.

I don’t pressure myself to be a world-class meditator. Most mornings, if all I do is set the timer for five minutes, good enough — even if my mind races the whole time. The benefits sometimes show up later in the day, like when I’m on hold for 30 minutes with the cable company. I might remember to take a breath and even enjoy the wait (if not the interminable hold music).

For a professional overcomplicator like me, I wondered how to choose meditation teachers to follow. Some had a vocal quality or used musical accompaniment I found irritating, as if they were trying too hard to be soothing. I’m sure those teachers inspire many people, but not every instructor is going to be everyone’s cup of green tea. I’ve got to have chemistry with my mentors.

Probably my favorite teacher is Buddhist nun Pema Chödrön, who freely shares her own foibles and challenges. “I have this hopelessly unworkable, nonmeditative mind, and I’ve devoted my whole life to it,” Chödrön said at one of her talks. I also suggest Insight Timer and the Monterey Bay Aquarium’s MeditOcean series.

Last year I put my dogged nature to use and signed on for a yearlong intensive yoga training. Even after all my grumbling, the training I chose included generous doses of meditation. Now I can teach, perhaps to students as resistant to meditation as I was. They’ll find out many of their teachers don’t have the whole serenity thing all lined up.

Hopefully, they too will discover it’s fine for them to seek peace, even if they never actually get a handle on it.

I’m especially looking forward to the students averse to meditation, the ones who come late and leave early — until perhaps they begin to stay.

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## **You Always Signed Your Letters, "Love, Dad"**

published in Lunch Ticket, March 2022

Hi Dad,

When you died, I figured there wasn't any point in writing to you. But since the world broke down last year, everything has shifted, including how I want to communicate with you. I know it's been a while since I last wrote to you. Yes, I know—15 years. You value precision.

You were devout about following the news, but has it all been too much, or what? The election, the pandemic, the racial reckoning. Plus an insurrection not far from where you worked. Maybe your passion for current events is part of why I needed to talk to you. It's not the only reason.

I'd built a believable character arc for you. You were the villain with an underlying soft heart, horribly abused by your own father and unwittingly taking over his part when raising your two girls. It's why I spent my early years keeping more than six feet of quarantine distance from you.

Our narrative included me confronting you in your later years about your bouts of rage. You cautiously took responsibility, wanting desperately to build a loving relationship with me. I eventually mustered up forgiveness and even came to appreciate some of the better traits I got from you. The perfectionism sometimes pays off for me.

But the past two years shook up my storyline about you. The pandemic brought death so close, with many of us not knowing if we'd be the next to catch COVID or die from it—or if it would hit our parents, spouses, kids, friends, neighbors. Death has been on our minds so much; it's become less mysterious and distant. Maybe that's why I felt closer to you.

Like so many others, there were months when I rarely left home. I had time to dig through everything you'd saved—the report cards, archery awards, notes from parent/teacher conferences.

I started viewing you differently when I found photos I hadn't seen before. In one, it's 1956, five years before I turned up. You're 31, wearing your trademark brown, horn-rimmed glasses. You hold a cigarette and a book. Your first daughter sits on your lap. You read to her. She's not yet two and unbelievably cute. You don't pander to the camera. Your eyes are fixed on the page. It's a moment of such sweetness, free from the dramatic scenes that would erupt in later years.

Trying to build a case in your defense, Mom has always said, "Your father loved you girls so much." As I dug through the remnants you left behind, I started believing her theory. In your notes from a 1969 meeting with Principal Rosenberg, you detailed her views on my misbehavior. Your notes are glaringly free from any mention of what was happening at home, which may have caused me to behave as I did.

You and Mom tried to address these conditions through family talks. You both also tried bribery (briefly effective), and unkept threats of limiting my rampant TV watching. I remember

that Mom ran those family meetings. Talking was never your strongest skill. I realized how out of place you might have felt living with three females—especially since the two of us, me and Mom, were always extremely verbal.

You once came to my 4th-grade class to talk about your job. After telling us you were an engineer at the Interior Department, you started sweating, forgot what you'd planned to say, and tanked in a classroom of nine-year-olds. Later in life, I understood why you'd never earned the elusive Ph.D. you'd sought—you kept failing the oral exams.

Your limited communication skills must have left you flummoxed as you raised us. But in the paper trail you left, I found evidence of your efforts to converse with me in your own ways.

There was a short note you sent me in 1978, my first year away at college. It's in your beautiful handwriting, reminding me of the countless attempts you made to improve your daughters' penmanship. "Dear Laura, don't let yourself get discouraged," you began, before offering ideas for making friends and getting involved in clubs. You signed off, as you always did, "Love, Dad." In light of the emotions that had piled up this past year, the *Love, Dad* really crumpled me. Amidst those boxes, I discovered how much I missed you.

I can't know exactly how you would have responded to what's happened these past two years, but I've got some ideas. You would have yelled at the TV and the newspaper regularly, louder than my husband, Tom. (These days, I'm even more sorry you were gone before I met him.) You and Tom would have watched the news together, with you using the colorful language he knows I got from you. He grew up with polite midwestern restraint. Generally, he finds my foul mouth amusing—except when he's appalled.

You would have been proud of the results of my more focused attention on my writing career, figuring you'd finally conveyed your love for following the news to me. "That's my daughter in *The Washington Post*," you would have said about your hometown paper to every person at the assisted living place you'd be sharing with Mom.

But you've been gone since 2005, after eight grueling years of declining health, the last spent as the lone Jew at the Lutheran Church Home. I created a file called "Grief," and put it in a drawer since your death. Reopening it, I found the chaplain's eulogy for you. He wrote how you attended worship services with unfamiliar scripture, taking solace from the physical pain you endured. I still flinch remembering our calls after I left Maryland for California. You were always so happy to hear from me but often ended our talks abruptly when a fresh bout of pain overtook you.

In the grief folder, I also found a cassette with a voice message from two weeks before you passed. You painstakingly formed the words: "Hi Laur, this is Dad. I'm just calling to say hello. (*pause*) I love you, Darling, (*then, more faintly*) bye-bye now."

In another box, I unearthed the Super 8 films and had them digitized. In 59-seconds of grainy film, I wear a thick, white bathing cap at Rock Creek Pool. At age two, I retain a touch of baby fat and sport the dimple that prompted aunts to think my cheek was theirs to pinch. You carry me down the concrete steps into the water. You've got the start of the weight gain that took hold of you later. Your dark, ultra-curly hair is short. Your glasses are off. You smile at me the whole time. You dance with me! — spin me around in a way you wouldn't live to do at my wedding. At 31-seconds you lean in to tell me something. The film is silent, but I can hear it, Dad. I can hear us laughing. And I can feel myself, Dad, so small beside you, so safe and filled with joy over your delight in me.

It seems weird how part of you always wanted to protect me, even though no one protected me from you during your rage blackouts. While I've got a temper of my own, I work my ass off to mitigate it. Even so, Tom sees evidence of your influence when I stifle a flare-up. Mom often asks me what qualities I got from you, and I usually cite the anger. But these days, I can also see that your less-visible, tender heart is also part of our shared DNA. I'm guessing you're cringing while reading this, that you'd admit to being a badass much sooner than copping to being fragile.

With every box I sorted, I saw how much you cared about me, how much you'd want to know I'm okay. Despite the pain our world faces, I'm doing alright. I've got Tom. I'm healthy. I'm very involved with looking out for Mom. I've got wonderful friends. And, of course, still the cats. And the writing.

It took a worldwide catastrophe to make me wish you were here again, alive and in-person, though I would have fretted over you like I do over Mom. She recently told me you'd worried about me too, like when I had that anxiety attack and was taken to the hospital during my first year of college while you were four hours away. I understand now that I'm a stepparent. Just like you, Dad, I got two girls. I see what it feels like to want to make sure they're safe.

Reconnecting with you wasn't something I thought would come from so unwillingly spending so much time staying home. But I'll take it. It's good having you around again—especially your foul mouth.

Your voice comes through me as I wander the house cursing about the news, about the world of injustice that keeps getting unearthed. I stomp down the stairs, channeling you. And I feel slightly better, knowing you're with me.

Love,

Laura

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**OrangeCoast**  
MAGAZINE

How the Pandemic Changed the Way I Feel About Milestone Birthdays Laura Sturza

November 19, 2021

I've always had trouble with the nines. At 29, 39, and 49, I was acutely aware of time. At each crossover to a milestone birthday, I'd reflect on the past decade and ready myself for the one ahead with a mix of hope, curiosity, and dread. I recently turned 60. My 59th year didn't conjure up the same worries about the next big one.

Like most of us trying to crawl out of our quarantine cocoons, my attention has been on other matters. Most of my focus was on keeping alive and healthy, along with praying others stayed well. Given the staggering losses so many people suffered during the pandemic, my reflection on the cusp of this new decade was—*who cares about a higher number?* Being alive is good enough for me. In lieu of the showy, pre-COVID parties I threw for myself and loved ones, I took time to consider whether turning 60 had to be a huge turning point—or if it could be something else.



Illustration by Hannah Agosta

Twenty years as a Southern Californian stoked my beliefs in endless sunshine and a commitment to healthy lifestyles. These and other Orange County core values can foster faith we've got a shot at prolonging youthfulness. *Sixty is the new 50* sounds like an achievable goal. But that tagline feels less relevant now. What if 60 is just 60? A number and nothing more.

COVID-19 upended a sense of time for many of us. In the lingo of 12-step recovery, "One Day at a Time" now seems more relevant than considering life in 10-year increments. The mindfulness practice I engage in offers a similar perspective. It suggests there's a chance to be free from the confines of the specific day, year, and hour; and teaches me that a birthday is another day to live in a timeless manner.

"We can be really alive, fully present, and very happy during breakfast-making," Tibetan Buddhist monk Thich Nat Han wrote. "We can see making breakfast as mundane work or as a privilege—it just depends on our way of looking." His teachings helped me picture a quieter birthday. My husband and I had left our beloved California home in 2017 to move to Maryland and help my mom. We took frequent trips West before the pandemic. I hoped to practice the monk's ideas during my first trip back to Orange County.

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The pandemic shook up another mindset I had about aging—the need to look youthful "for my age." I hoped I could be like my mom. She has always looked a decade younger, including now, at 95. (And she has pulled this off without employing any highly skilled cosmetic surgeons.)

Admittedly, in the past, I flaunted my middle-aged status because I relished the "No, you're not 58!" comments it elicited. Even when living in our notoriously age-conscious region, I willingly disclosed my birth year—1961. I did so while cloaked in my refuse-to-grow-up uniform of white jeans and Converse sneakers. This year, when one of my stepdaughters learned I was turning 60, she was surprised. "I thought you were younger." Her words didn't give me the happy jolt I used to get when people commented on my youthfulness. I realized, any desire I had to pass for 50 is gone.

The past year and a half has helped me better understand aging through the lens of a close friend who'd nursed her brother through years of cancer treatments. She prayed he would

be released from pain. When he died on her birthday, she wrote: "I'll always have a reminder to be grateful for each year I get. And certainly, I have lost the privilege of complaining about getting older." Indeed, the tolls of the pandemic made this clear. Being alive at any age is a gift.

I've also figured out I have no need for do-overs. In reviewing the past five decades, I can see that each era included its share of pain, grace, and joy. At 50, I was newly in love and engaged to be married for the first time. It was a wonderful year. Sure, given the option, I'd cash in a few middle-aged aches and let go of worrying about my elderly mom. But overall, each decade has been better than the one before it.

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While many of us have begun to gingerly see one another, I remained unsure how I wanted to celebrate my milestone. In childhood, birthdays were a go-big proposition for me, fueled by my mom, who believed the festivities should last a full month. As an adult, I kept the spirit of Mom's supersized tradition, packing my home with friends for show-and-tell parties where people performed a song, told a story, showed artwork.

Last year, my 9-year-old-self stamped her feet over not being able to gather people. I quickly snapped out of it and had a sweet, nice-enough Zoom party. But a year more of pandemic-fatigue left me with limited energy for event planning. Many of my potential guests, whether my age or much younger, are as exhausted as I am. Rather than a party, I thought we might all enjoy a good nap—in the style of our kindergarten days.

In the end, on the actual day, I went with a minimalist's grand plan for my 60th. I greeted it with the awareness that I've been given the gift of living this long, and the grace of one more day to appreciate the people I love. My birthday was simply another day to make and eat breakfast. I even hosted that virtual slumber party. From the comfort of our own homes, we laid out our blankies for a delicious afternoon nap.

The next day, I boarded my first plane in 18 months to see loved ones in Orange County. My cousins welcomed me to their beautiful Corona Del Mar home. I barely mentioned my birthday. We got carryout from Thai Del Mar and enjoyed it from a bench at Lookout Point. The next morning, I walked Balboa Island with my cousin, marveling over the flowers and discussing our grandparents. And when visiting other loved ones and catching up, my mind wasn't on my birthday. With gratitude, I kicked off my new decade without fanfare, and with people who love one another at whatever age we find ourselves.

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## The Washington Post

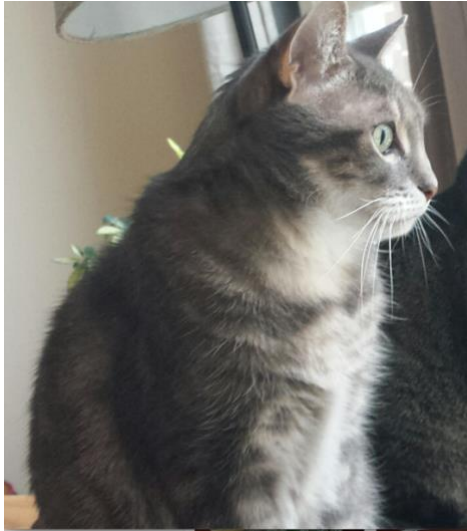
**How a California animal control officer helped find a lost cat in Maryland**

By **Laura Sturza**

March 25, 2020

On the last night of a painfully long February, our cat, Moki, slipped out the front door of our Maryland house and into the frigid night, despite his advanced age and a kidney ailment that requires treatment. Moki was so stealthy in his escape that my husband, Tom, and I didn't even notice he was gone until long past dark. So, we piled on coats on top of sweaters, and with both of our voices still weak in the aftermath of bad colds, we roamed the streets calling for him.

Even if February is the shortest month, this one couldn't end soon enough. Tom and I started practicing social distancing before it became a part of everyone's life. My cold had lasted for the first half of it, and Tom's the second. Meanwhile, there were the stresses of moving. I'd spent the better part of the month clearing out my 94- year-old mother's apartment. We had recently moved her to an assisted-living facility that, fortunately, she loves. I had hoped March would bring a blessed turnaround. But, before that could happen, on Feb. 27 my mother received some very bad news about her health (nothing related to the coronavirus). Then, on a confounded extra day known as leap day, my cat disappeared. Fifteen years ago, my father and my cat died two months apart. I was terrified that the situation was repeating itself. We had to find Moki.



Tom and I were unsure how to track him at night. I didn't panic but went inside and scoured the Internet for ideas. There were tips about creating posters and notifying shelters. I had used them all before, because this wasn't my escape artist's first foray into the outside world. I'd adopted Moki when I lived in the Los Angeles area, long before I met Tom. Our interspecies family moved back to my native Maryland from California three years ago to assist my mother.

My cat, in his youth, had pushed out a screen from my second-story North Hollywood apartment while I slept. That time, I spent a week on a feverish search in 100-degree heat. My California neighbors got to know me so well that when I tried handing a flier about my missing feline to a little girl and her dad, the girl said "Moki, right?," letting me know she had already seen my posters on every bulletin board and utility pole within a mile. It paid off when, after many purported sightings by neighbors, the woman right next door spotted him and helped me nab the little rascal as he stood loudly meowing in the enclosed parking lot behind her apartment building.

Now, given the late hour, plastering my Rockville neighborhood with posters wasn't going to help. And all of the animal control centers in our area were closed.

Temperatures were dropping to the mid-20s. In desperation, I called my former hometown and talked to Los Angeles Animal Control Officer Angela Llerenas. She warned us that, if Moki were nearby, leaving lights on outside might attract a predator that could hurt him. She suggested we put out boxes filled with our clothes so he would smell us, and that we leave his litter box outside. We followed all of her directions. Then Tom and I roamed our neighborhood again, still with no luck.

Exhausted, we went back inside, and I began collecting Moki photos for a poster to run online. Though it was 1:30 a.m., sleep seemed impossible. So, I made one last search nearby. I



circled our house, and just as I was about to call it a night, I saw Moki's tail! Probably because it was twice its usual size from fear. He let out an earthshaking howl. I had read that missing cats can be so scared they will bolt, so I got low to the ground and talked to him quietly. That seemed to relax him. I scooped him up, took him inside and proceeded to sob uncontrollably, refusing to let him go until his fur warmed. He is a cat who isn't fond of being held for long, but he willingly allowed it this once.

After I calmed down, I called Llerenas to thank her and let her know that her cross-country guidance had helped bring my cat home. I could not be more grateful that a city employee from my former hometown provided the expert input that probably saved Moki's life — along with rescuing me from overwhelming anxiety.

Because of Llerenas, the same scenario from 15 years ago wouldn't replay itself this year. And finding Moki gave me hope that my mom can survive her diagnosis and fulfill a destiny she began declaring when she was in her 50s. "I'm going to live to be 100," she has repeatedly told us. With a passion for life as strong as Mom has, and with an improved diagnosis after additional tests, I very much hope that she surpasses her goal of living to 100 in good health. But no matter what challenges our family faces as we support Mom's pursuit of well-being, I can curl up for many more nights with Moki beside me, thanks to the kindness and expertise of a city employee on the other side of the country who helped us on a frightening February evening.

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## **Both Sides Now: Joni Mitchell and Leonard Cohen at Signature Theatre**

September 2022

Preview by Laura Sturza



Heartbreak, lust, rage, and reconciliation. The songs by two of Canada's best-loved singer/songwriters, Joni Mitchell and Leonard Cohen, have it all. Signature Theatre's intimate cabaret production of their work, *Both Sides Now*, will feature music that has soundtracked generations of collective yearning and despair, songs like *Cactus Tree*, *Hallelujah*, *Big Yellow Taxi*, *Suzanne*, and *Both Sides Now*. The pair were a [short-lived couple](#) who met in 1967 at the Newport Folk Festival. While we might wish they'd gone on to duke it out in dueling kiss-off songs, neither had Taylor Swift's propensity for being explicit about the leading players in their songs. Even so, In Malka Maron's book, *Joni Mitchell: In Her Own Words*, Mitchell acknowledges that [Rainy Night House](#) used the pair's breakup as source material. While Cohen didn't specifically namecheck his affair with Mitchell in his songs, there are no shortage of hypothesizers who search for references to her in his work, as [Tom Taylor](#) does when he suggests that Cohen's poem, [Two Went to Sleep](#), was the songwriter's response to *Rainy Night House*. In a [London Times](#) interview, journalist Mark Ellis writes of Cohen, "I asked him about his love affair with the enviably prolific Joni Mitchell in the late Sixties and he gave a softly competitive laugh: "How would you like living with Beethoven?" To prepare for Signature's cabaret show starring [Danielle Wertz](#) and [Robbie Schaefer](#), review [Allan Showalter](#)'s breakdown of their brief affair and long-term friendship, and come up with theories of your own about why they didn't have a chance. [November 1 to 13 at Signature Theatre, 4200 Campbell Avenue Arlington, VA, \\$38.](#)

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## Understudies: The Unsung Superheroes of D.C. Theater

*The essential workers of theater, these actors jump in at the last minute to save the show and keep performances from getting sidelined by COVID.*

by **LAURA STURZA** JULY 27TH, 2022



Shakespeare Theatre Company's recent production of *Our Town* had understudies perform in every one of its 33 shows. "By the time we had six understudies performing for full audiences, it was a madhouse," says **Quinn Johnson**, an understudy who acted in the all-local production. "But it's kind of amazing. You stand backstage, and there's this calm that happens." Johnson credits the work of Stage Manager **Joe Smelser** and Director **Alan Paul** for keeping together this would-be madhouse, which drew strong reviews from the *Washington Post* and *DC Theater Arts* that name-checked its understudy stars.

Even with stringent safety precautions in place at D.C. theaters, including regular COVID testing and COVID compliance officers hired to enforce health and safety protocols, many shows have been forced to miss several performances or, in some cases, close completely. In December, Arlington's Signature Theatre canceled its pre-Broadway production of *KPOP, The Musical*, scheduled to play at the Anthem, due to pandemic-related logistical challenges. And shortly after opening night, Anacostia Playhouse canceled its monthlong run of *A Snowy Nite at the Dew Drop Inn*. Before December was up, Signature was again forced to close its production of *Rent* for 10 days after multiple cast members fell ill. More recently, the Olney Theatre Center's bilingual production of *The Music Man* delayed its opening by 10 days in mid-June due to a COVID outbreak, and Studio Theatre was forced to end its world premiere run of *John Proctor Is the Villain* several days early due to a breakthrough case.

Understudies have kept closures, missed productions, and delayed runs from happening more often, allowing shows to continue and theaters to stay open. Multiple artistic directors at local playhouses say understudies are responsible for saving shows.

"I would consider them the theatrical equivalent of superheroes," says Shakespeare Theatre's Casting Director **Danica Rodriguez**. "This job is not easy. Sometimes understudies are learning three roles at once, and often don't know if they are going on until a few hours before [the show]."

The need for understudies has meant increased staffing at theaters that wasn't required pre-COVID. Round House Theatre's Artistic Director **Ryan Rilette** tells *City Paper* via email, "this used to be something that only the largest theaters/largest shows used consistently. It's now becoming standard at even mid-sized theaters like ours."

In June, the Bethesda theater was spared a week of canceled performances of its *Nollywood Dreams* production when **Renee Wilson** understudied for lead actor **Yetunde Felix-Ukwu**, who tested positive for COVID. Wilson, an alum of D.C.'s Duke Ellington School of the Arts, stepped in to play the character of Fayola Ogunleye, a former *Nollywood* star.

Before the pandemic, Wilson says theater companies gave her the coaching and direction she needed to successfully step in as an understudy. She says she has received even greater support since the pandemic. “We ended up getting a dialect coach,” she says of Round House’s efforts to ensure her success as Fayola. Cast members ran lines with her on breaks, and the entire team “did everything they could to be sure I could absorb the role,” explains Wilson, who starred in the show’s preview performances.

And understudies aren’t just stepping in for those infected with COVID. As the pandemic has recalibrated how we balance work and personal life, understudies allow for more flexibility. Rodriguez likens their role to an insurance policy.

“I think that the idea of the show must go on has been broken down a little bit, and I think there’s more recognition for humanity in our spaces,” she says. “[Previously], there was a constant feeling of a grind and pushing and pushing.”

With added understudy support, if a cast member needs to take a mental health day to rest or help an ailing family member, they don’t have to worry about closing down the show.

**Matthew Gardiner**, Signature’s artistic director, points to additional reasons why theaters have come to understand just how crucial understudies are to any given production. They are essential workers able to step in when parents need to leave shows due to COVID shutdowns at schools, and they are ready to fill in when an actor needs a personal day. “It’s not just about you having an ailment or an illness that has you calling out of a show,” Gardiner says, emphasizing the need to protect workers’ mental health as well as their physical health.

Pre-pandemic, many regional theaters like Olney didn’t have understudies or had them only for musicals. The added cost of hiring and rehearsing understudies is daunting, but worth it. Olney’s Artistic Director **Jason Loewith** says via email that they’re shouldering those costs to serve audiences and keep shows onstage. Since resuming performances last fall, Olney has added understudies, when possible, to non-musicals and doubled the number of understudies for musical productions, as they did with *The Music Man*.

“Understudies have saved the day for us many a time since last fall,” Loewith says. “Nonetheless, even double coverage isn’t enough, and COVID has forced us to cancel upwards of 20 performances this season at a cost of hundreds of thousands of dollars.” Loewith points to the theater’s most recent production of *The Music Man*. Before the show opened, a single performer infected five others at a June dress rehearsal. Even with four understudies, they had to cancel 10 shows and delay opening night.

The financial balance of bringing on more, or any, understudies is still precarious though, as additional factors tax playhouse budgets. Gardiner says inflation and a strained labor force is impacting the cost of producing live theater. Additionally, Gardiner says, “We’re dealing with an audience that is not coming back as quickly as we’d like.”

For actors, however, the need for added understudies has created more jobs within the competitive industry, which is especially reassuring during the aforementioned inflation. “Since the pandemic, there are theaters who are looking for understudies who weren’t before, so more opportunities arose,” says Wilson, who stepped in for *Nollywood Dreams*. She also had the chance to prepare as an understudy for the Arena Stage production of **August Wilson’s** *Seven Guitars* last December. Though she was never called to perform in that show, she says the opportunity to work at Arena is a “D.C. actor’s dream.”

Theater fans also benefit from the work of understudies. These “dynamic and courageous performers,” as Rodriguez refers to them, make it possible for audiences to see live shows again after theaters closed in 2020 and 2021. Loewith agrees. “These performers are true heroes who,

through grit and determination and hard work and talent, perform complicated roles with minimal rehearsal for a paying audience. It's a very tough job, and I'm glad they're finally getting their due."

The sense of mutual appreciation extends to the relationship between understudies and lead actors. Wilson and Johnson echo a shared experience, that, as understudies, the chance to perform is a wonderful opportunity, but carries the weight of having watched lead performers rehearse for weeks, then get sidelined. Johnson was amazed to see colleagues return to the stage after sitting out for two weeks due to COVID and then turn in astounding performances.

"It's really inspiring, and it created a community where we could very seriously rely on one another to step in," says Johnson, who notes that sharing the stage with fellow understudies and lead actors in *Our Town* allowed audiences to see this camaraderie in action. "That was the whole idea. The director, Alan, told us quite often that the show is about community," Johnson says.

Theater in the time of COVID continues to demand that artistic directors adapt to ever-changing conditions and shoulder the costs of keeping performances running. Leaning on an increased corps of understudies is now considered money well spent: It keeps theaters open, actors employed, and audiences in seats.

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## LAWEEKLY

### [Best of L.A. People Issue 2011](#)



### **Robert Johnson: Lawman of the Cloth**

By Laura Sturza Thursday, May, 19 2011

**Not many people get credit** for both busting cabbies and saving souls. [Robert Johnson](#), as a senior transportation investigator for the Los Angeles Department of Transportation, runs sting operations to catch taxi drivers who bilk customers.

On Sundays he targets a different set of crooks. As the minister of a small neighborhood church in South L.A., Johnson gives his congregation the ammo to take down their spiritual demons.

Johnson started with the city 30 years ago, as a City Hall parking attendant under [Mayor Tom Bradley](#). At 20, he was fueling and parking cars for City Council members. For the past 21 years he has driven unmarked DOT vehicles to chase down fare-spiking cabbies. Yes, there really is this much drama in taxi regulation.

The DOT has a secret weapon — its female employees. By day the women do their jobs in standard business attire. But on the night of a sting, they're in Hollywood, wearing heels, stockings, skirts and a good deal of makeup. They act tipsy and hail a licensed cab.

Following hot on the taxi's heels are Johnson and his team in an unmarked car, tracking the correct fare, watching to see if the driver takes a three-mile route for an eight-block trip. If the women are overcharged, the drivers lose their permits for three years. "They're through — that's it," Johnson says.

They also sting unlicensed drivers, in tandem with Los Angeles Police Department officers. "Bandit" taxis haven't passed DOT's criminal background check and drug test, and their cars have not been inspected for safety.

To nail them, a plainclothes investigator or "operative" hails a bandit and negotiates a rate. Meanwhile, Johnson and three of his undercover agents lie in wait. When the operative and the driver strike a deal, the team moves in fast to make the arrest.

The lawbreaker's car is impounded for 30 days, putting many out of business. "He leaves there either needing a cab or he has to walk," Johnson says.

Licensed operators are big fans of the undercover teams. "Drivers call to say, 'Thank you, because this guy's been taking our trips,' " he says.

As for his other gig, Pastor Johnson leads his small congregation in an old building in a depressed area, where he easily talks about God and His nemesis. "It's kind of an old-fashioned idea, but I believe in the devil," Johnson says. "He is the one who influences folks to do things God has said not to do."

While his flock includes many law-abiding citizens, churchgoers include a former thief and a former gangbanger. The recovering sinners testify about their turnaround: "Several people stood up and said, 'I know I'm saved because I used to be involved in different activities I'm not involved in, and I no longer go to places I used to go,' " Johnson says.

His Sunday job has rubbed off on his city job: He treats everyone as if they were walking into his church. Of the more than 3,000 bad guys he's arrested, "Most of them will shake my hand and say, 'Thank you for treating me with respect.' "

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## Los Angeles Times

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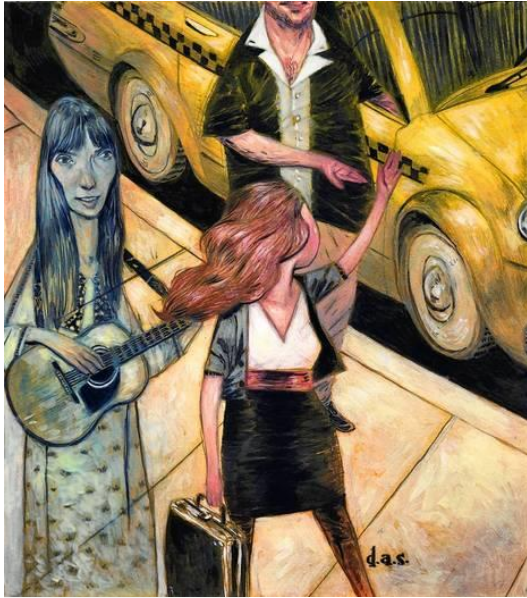
Joni Mitchell's music has loomed large over her ideas of love and California. Now she's focusing on the positive songs.

By Laura Sturza

*September 27, 2013*

I held Joni Mitchell responsible for my status as a perennially single woman. Maybe that was too much to pin on a singer-songwriter. But early on, Joni's music schooled me about what might be ahead on the romantic front. Ever since I heard her sing "Court and Spark," her musings about love and California have worked their way into my psyche and my life.





(Danny Schwartz, artist)

At 16, I hadn't kissed a boy, but I'd already learned how he could court me, love me, cheat on me, and take off to play his music in a desert town. I applied Joni's lessons to my imaginary boyfriends. Through those fantasies, I'd had some pretty advanced relationships long before I ventured into actual dating territory.

Under the influence of that voice — a soaring soprano that could go anywhere and do anything — I imagined a passionate life with a man I adored, a man who loved me back.

To be fair, I can see now that my skewed view of romance wasn't completely Joni's fault. As a hard-core Partridge Family fan a few years earlier, I'd cultivated many of the same beliefs. Music has always held sway over me. Whether the performer was David Cassidy or Robert Plant, I listened for the same message: Love is the greatest, love is the most gut-wrenching.

Listening to songs like "This Flight Tonight," I understood that lamenting over love offered nearly the same bang as finding love.

*You got the touch so gentle and sweet*

*But you've got that look so critical*

*Now I can't talk to you baby*

*I get so weak*

*Sometimes I think love is just mythical*

Even Joni's images of California had their way with me, luring me from my comfy hometown in Maryland to a spot squarely within reach of two famous landscapes from her songs: Laurel Canyon and the Pacific Ocean. Because I hadn't tracked down my man on the East Coast, I suspected he might be tucked away somewhere in the thick of Joni Country.

So I moved to Los Angeles and nearly landed in the arms of a skittish man who responded to my mention of Joni's lyrics online. I'm guessing at least a few women might pause before dating a guy who professed his love for Joni's music. After all, most of the men in her songs don't stick around. Later he made and broke three dates in quick succession.

It's been quite a while since Joni's music made its initial imprint on me. But I am still bent on seeking out anything Joni related, including an L.A. art show of her paintings and a tribute performance in which actor-singer John Kelly nailed the essence of her songs.



When I had the chance to see her live at the Greek Theatre in 2000, I made sure I went with a friend who shared my passion for her music. I wasn't about to exult over prospective and failed romances with just anyone.

A few years later, I took a new beau to UCLA's Royce Hall for an Alberta Ballet concert, which was set to her music. My date wasn't a real fan of hers, but lots of us will try almost anything on the early dating frontier. The show featured songs rife with ecological and political commentary. Post-performance my date and I hashed out the evening's virtues and flaws. There was some gorgeous dancing, certainly. But what surprised us was the relentlessly dark view the songwriter presented of a world bent on destruction. The paving of paradise had turned into a full-tilt warning that Armageddon was near. The absence of love songs was conspicuous.

I hadn't realized how dark Joni could go. I suppose the high notes that she easily finessed had helped me block out the underlying black and discordant tones.

Since that evening, my affinity for her music hasn't so much cooled as shifted. Her moments of optimism are what I find more appealing these days. I cashed in my long-term relationship with lamentation for the belief that lasting love is possible for those who are lucky enough to find it, choose it, and bust their chops to maintain it.

It's been two years since that ballet performance, and now I'm engaged to Tom, who was my date that night. Much to my surprise, he has attended other dance concerts with me.

He works in the transportation industry, and coincidentally transit plays a big role in the Joni *oeuvre*. Planes, freeways and cars regularly keep people apart. When my fiancé talks about drivers and passengers, though, I don't think of cabbies coming to take lovers away as they do in "Big Yellow Taxi." I think of the drivers going to airports to bring lovers home to their adoring partners.

Clearly, all the years of pining to the soundtrack of Joni's voice paid off. I'm going to marry the man I love, whom I met in California. And I hear that next year, the Alberta Ballet will set dances to her love songs. I suspect I'll have a pretty good date that night.

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