

# The Vintage Voice

Serving The Church Pension Fund's Family of Beneficiaries

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## Promoting Mental Agility

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I recently came across a list of things that older people can do to improve their memories, promote good health, and nurture mental agility. (It may give you a clue to the state of my mental agility that I can't remember where I read that list.)

Several of the things listed surprised me. Ballroom and square dancing were two. Changing hands to perform ordinary tasks was another, as was learning to juggle. Reading, doing crossword puzzles, playing bridge, exercising to music, painting — these helpful activities I had known about.

Well, my husband does crossword puzzles — with a vengeance! Woe be it to me if I linger too long over the comics, because that is the page where the daily crossword puzzle is located. On many Sunday afternoons, he describes the *New York Times* puzzle as “a terrible puzzle, a trial for man and beast, with clues known only to New Yorkers, just plain impossible.” Translated, this means: “I can't do this one in twenty minutes.” I long ago decided I didn't want to go there. After all, he needs me to help him spell his answers correctly. Sometimes he really wants me to spell them incorrectly, so that they will fit. In fact, he can get downright cross if I don't spell to fit his needs.

Square dancing we used to do a lot, until he decided that he could no longer twirl for very long before getting motion sickness. Ballroom dancing I love. I have suggested many times that we take classes to learn some of the more exotic styles. No go. He only consented to do South Carolina's signature dance, the shag, with me when I told him I didn't see what the difference was in doing the slop, or some such dance, with the youth group, rather than doing the shag with me. Now he manages to go out on the dance floor and shag once or twice during an occasional evening without too much embarrassment. Somehow, I don't think that is going to keep me mentally alert.

Call me crazy, you bridge fans, but I dislike the game. Scrabble, yes; bridge, no. Why would anyone want to play bridge with a perfectly good book nearby? (In my book, any book is worth a try.) I already read a lot, as you might have guessed. I exercise with and without music. I even do leg lifts while I brush my teeth. (Don't try this with anyone else in the room. You might kick them, and they also might think you are nuts.) Our son juggles expertly, but it seems a limited parlor trick to me, and I don't think I would be invited back if I tried it at dinner parties.

On a trip, once, I asked my three companions to tell me how they put on their socks and shoes. Each one had a different order — left sock, left shoe, right sock, right shoe, or right side first, then left, or both socks, then shoes — you get the picture. They then turned to me and asked, “How do you do it?” My answer was, “All of the above.” I like variety, and I try to vary the way I do things. Michael Jordan, the basketball icon, puts on his shoes before he puts on his suit pants. I still haven't mastered that!

Painting is something I might try, but the form of mental agility I have decided to take up is writing poetry. This decision was made when I got up at 4 a.m. and found my ugly little white plastic disk of a bathroom nightlight dancing in the dark. It was jumping and jiving! It was really going to town. Because watching that little light, so tame and quiet for years, and now strutting its stuff all by itself in the dark, delighted me, I decided to write “An Ode to a Nightlight.” It was fun! It rhymed! It had three stanzas! I was on my way.

As fate would have it, soon after I had written this little poem, our local newspaper had a poetry contest. I, along with 1100 others, sent in my offering. I won’t win, I thought, but they will think the subject unusual, and someone might comment on it. Of course, I had expected there would be only 100 or so entries, not 1100.

When the top ten winners were announced, I read them with great interest. Things have changed, dear friends. Remember when poetry rhymed? Forget it! None of these rhymed. Remember when poems were at least four lines long? No more. One of these was only a title and one line. It was effective, but not what I would have called a poem.

The first place winner was about suicide — generations of suicide. Suicide literally and suicide figuratively, by women of India who give up their individual wants and desires to serve their husbands and families. Nothing rhymed. It was beautiful. It evoked deep feelings. It was poetry.

I was humbled by the talent those ten poems represented. Some were beyond me. I could not figure out what they meant. Others I loved. Maybe they have changed the rules of poetry, too. To each his own, I decided. It is all right to write poetry in any way you choose. I felt opened up — freed from past expectations and encouraged to try to express my feelings in the ways that suited me.

Another good thing about entering the contest is that now I am on a list of people who receive emails from a University of South Carolina professor of poetry, and from others interested in encouraging poetry writing. I am invited to poetry readings, writing classes, even a Poetry Slam, which is like head-to-head combat between two groups of competing poets. It is instant retaliatory rhyme. I don’t know if there is a judge who decides who wins, or whether people attending get up and stomp their feet, whistle and clap, but some day, I plan to go to one and find out.

Instead of giving up and leaving it to new generations, I have decided to keep writing. At first, I set myself the task of writing a poem each week, but that doesn’t work well for me. Some poems just flow out, already written. Others wake me up at night, nagging me to change a word or a line. Sometimes they rhyme, sometimes they don’t. They are happy, sad, compassionate, breezy — whatever my mood is. I tried to write one for my husband of 48 years, (the crossword puzzle guy), but I have worked and worked on it, and it still isn’t right. Fortunately, he *is*, and that’s what counts.

Not only am I going to keep on writing, I’m going to keep on calling it poetry. That’s my story, and I’m sticking to it.



Nancy R. Duvall lives in Columbia, SC, with her retired husband, the Rt. Rev. Charles Duvall, who shares her love of daylilies . . . but that is another story.