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As I helped a friend downsize, we went through things to sell, donate, or discard, including a coffee mug that read,

At my age
I've seen it all, done it all, and heard it all.
I just can't remember it all.

"I'm going to toss the thing," she told me. "I don't know what Bernie was thinking when he handed it to me."

"Give it to me then," I said.

And so, I became the owner of an idea that makes me smile every time I think of it.

Like all truisms, the coffee-mug message contains a kernel of truth together with a handful of generalities. True, my short-term memory is not what it once was—sometimes I can't find the word I'm looking for (or my keys, or my cell phone)—but have I "seen it all"? Not by a long shot!

Yesterday evening, as I returned with my dog from our mile-long hike past neighbors' fields, something came toward me on my upper driveway that pulled me up short. Judging by the bushiness of its tail, it had to be a skunk, yet it seemed too big and broad for one. As we neared each other, I saw that it wasn't an adult skunk but four small young ones traipsing so close to one another, they seemed as one. I gave them as wide berth as I could, taking Abby with me; still, they scattered, emitting their puny perfume, as we strolled past. As soon as we were out of the way, they fell back into formation. Individually they were so small, their mother must have evicted them—perhaps she was close to giving birth to another litter. They couldn't have weighed more than a few ounces each.

That night and the following day I wondered if and where and when the four small fry sheltered for the night. And did they find anything to eat? Skunks hunt mice and insects, but clustered together as they were, the four would have a hard time searching and stalking. Yet sticking together had made them appear formidable enough, I imagine, that fox and coyote and raptor would leave them alone.

So, there's one thing I'd never experienced before. The other is selling my home to downsize as my friend did ten years ago—only I'm doing it at eighty, whereas she was sixty-eight then, and I'm moving to Saratoga, Wyoming, whereas she remained in Springfield, Illinois. Either way, such transitions produce stress—they force you out of your comfort zone. You may fall back to relying on comfort food or drink—but that brings the hazard of substance abuse.

Earlier goodbyes in my life often brought a sense of relief—I'm glad it's over—but this time my leave-taking causes unmitigated sorrow: I'm saying goodbye to a place dear to me: the home I built on the Wyoming acreage I dubbed Windy Acres. It's windy all right, but scrutinizing four tiny skunks march in lockstep toward an uncertain future compensates many times over.

Transitioning to another lifestyle entails decision-making; luckily, forgetting the meaning of this or that word has little bearing on the task. Decision-making takes planning, making lists, contacting service providers like movers and cleaners, packing the things to take and disposing of those no longer useful. If a dress or dish is in good shape, I may donate it but if it's torn or cracked, I may have to throw it away—always a painful step for me.

Painful steps can be executed so long as we're in reasonably good health and mentally fit. As we age, physical and mental health issues tend to become more pronounced, especially if unresolved conflicts lurk in back of the brain. We may become distracted and have a hard time completing a task, let alone adapt to transitioning.

I have lived with an unsettled mind, with childhood and adolescence truncated by abuse and a parent's mental unhealth. Today I know that such states arise from family history, the trauma of war, or sexual and/or physical abuse—things that reside in a past and can be hard to pin down. Sometimes we are willful in our forgetfulness—the past is too painful to contemplate. Trouble is, this sort of forgetfulness leads to a whole lot of stress—and stress causes wear and tear on body and soul.

Life is stressful no matter what. No human being—and no animal—escapes the stress of having to provide for oneself day in and day out. Like small skunks setting out on a hazardous journey, we are tossed into the world in sink-or-swim fashion. If loved ones depend on us for their survival, it adds stress-inducing responsibility.

Not long ago, while looking out the window at faraway lightning, I saw a young coyote sniffing in my raised garden beds, looking for grubs, maybe. It hobbled on three legs, holding up its left front. Was the leg broken? Infected? Bitten? I opened the window and told the young visitor to go away; I didn't want my dog to tangle with it. Then I saw its mother gliding through the tall grasses nearby—looking for a meal, no doubt, to share with her injured cub. In the evening I often hear coyotes sing, but they had never come this close to the house. Both mother and cub, I imagine, carry with them a load of stress.

In addition to the stress brought on by our immediate environment, humans have the additional stress brought on by disturbing thoughts and memories. To reduce stress, which we all ought to do, it may be necessary to figure out where these thoughts and memories originate. The unexamined life is not worth living, an ancient sage said long ago. How do you examine your life? He didn't say.

For me it was necessary to look back at my life in Germany, which I left as a young woman. I was eager to immigrate and get away from the past, not understanding the past comes along for the ride. It made itself felt soon enough, and I had to piece together what was so disturbing. An

essay I wrote years ago, published in a literary journal, details some of what I recalled from my unhappy childhood, “When Mourning Becomes Family Story.” If you so desire, you may access it under “Essays” in Cagibi’s Issue # 5, <https://cagibilit.com/when-mourning-becomes-family-story/>

Refusing to examine the past does nothing to foster mental, physical, or emotional wellbeing. Not that examining the past is a walk in the park; it isn’t. But the alternative may be a life cut short by diseases of stress. I remember reading that about 89 percent of human illness and disease is due to stress. The statistics are striking.

After listening to my physical complaints, a physician at a student health center told me, “You must walk an hour a day and swim an hour a day.” He’d diagnosed my symptoms as due to stress, and he was right. I was involved in a doctorate program that, at fifty, I found rough going—not intellectually but due to the numerous small and not-so-small chicaneries and deprecations the tenured profs deemed necessary to impose on the upstart.

Did I follow the physician’s advice? I did to the extent I could. I lived in a neighborhood where it was ok to walk at 6 AM. It often drizzled at that hour, but a lightweight poncho took care of that. At lunch hour I used the pool in the student sports center during “faculty swim,” when few people swam laps. I’d swim for forty minutes (the same amount of time I allotted to my walk), then eat my sandwich after a fast shower while getting dressed. Thus I managed to get through both the program and my teaching load as TA—with a bruised ego, to be sure but, as I learned from other grad students, that was par for the course. Stress, however, was a more or less constant companion until I retired. Only then did I start taking deep breaths.

This doesn’t mean I have it all figured out. “I thought I was beyond anxiety attacks, but I’m hyperventilating today,” I texted a friend earlier today. “Do you have time to talk?” When we got together on the phone, I had to explain, of course, what caused my distress—unexpected demands by my buyers’ bank before escrow would proceed. Even after talking things over, stress stayed with me for the rest of the day. Only in the evening did my mind turn calm, when Abby and I went through our accustomed ritual of hiking at twilight. “I’m glad this day is over,” I said to her, a thought that rarely comes to me anymore.

I venture to say, few physicians today would give the advice that came my way in my grad student days. Today’s trend is to attribute mental and emotional stress to a brain that needs to be corrected with antidepressants. That’s what my granddaughter, an undergraduate, tells me. She believes with all her heart that the approach is right for her.

Working on crossword puzzles, which I love to do with family members or friends, discloses my lack of remembering. I may know the meaning of the word I’m looking for, even the mouthfeel of it—I just can’t evoke the word itself. Sometimes it’ll come to me in German, and I’m amazed that a language I left at twenty-three still resides in the recesses of my brain.

And now the time is near to say goodbye, au revoir, adios, or, as the British say, ta-ta. In a few days I’ll settle in my downsized abode, regretting the move though knowing it had to be done.

My “new” place will have problems, different from the ones I’m facing here but present nonetheless. The house is fifty years old and bears deferred-maintenance issues.

“I Never Promised You a Rose Garden” is a tune after a popular book of that title by Joanne Greenberg. I no longer promise a rosy future to myself. I know better. *Que sera, sera*—or, as my granddaughter would say, “It is what it is.”