

*****Check out the updated backstory after you read the piece*****

Happy Birthday to Us

By Stephen Rusiniak

From the book: **Chicken Soup for the Soul: Mom Knows Best**

To me a birthday means celebrating the presence of an individual in our lives.

~Meena Bajaj



Mom & me and one of my earliest birthday cakes

It was just what I wanted, the perfect present, a one-size-fits-all—something that I'd long thought of buying for myself but never did. But somehow, my mom—with her special maternal instincts and motherly radar, with her uncanny ability to glean information from snippets of overheard conversations—figured it out all by herself and gave me that one gift I truly wanted.

Nothing else could ever say, "Happy Birthday, Son," like a large gift-wrapped box containing a brand-new Sawzall reciprocating saw.

Two months later, I put my newest tool through its paces while volunteering on a mission trip to Appalachia with my church. We were helping to make homes warmer, safer and drier. My trusty saw and I quite capably resolved a plethora of challenging cutting circumstances with ease and efficiency. One night, as I was reflecting on its versatility, I suddenly wondered what I had done to deserve such an awesome birthday present. Then came an even greater question: What does anyone ever do to deserve any special recognition for nothing more having been born?

It occurred to me that aside from being the blue-eyed, blond, babbling bundle of joy that caused my parents' world to change, I'd done nothing to merit becoming the recipient of birthday cards and gifts.

It also occurred to me that if anyone truly deserved to be recognized for enduring nine long months of discomfort that included morning sickness, indigestion, anemia, and swollen ankles—if there was any one person who'd earned kudos for my birth—it was my mom.

It seemed so wrong for her to have done all the work and for me to receive a lifetime of birthday celebrations!

So, it was on that night in Appalachia, as I packed away my saw, that I knew I was going to do something about this.

The following year, on my birthday I surprised Mom with a beautiful floral arrangement. I would do this several more times over the coming years as we'd mutually note the anniversary of my birth.



My trusty Sawzall and I that one summer in Appalachia

Getting these annual arrangements to her should have been easy, but in truth, it wasn't. This mother and grandmother filled her life with a whirlwind of activities. While some of her flowers were dispatched to her home, not all of them were. Once, I surprised her by placing them inside her car outside the deli where she often stopped for a midmorning cup of coffee. Another time, I had them delivered to the hospital information desk where she was volunteering. Still another year, she found them at the food pantry where she helped out.

Although the delivery locations, as well as the arrangements themselves, would differ from year to year, the one thing that never changed was the verbiage on the enclosed card. My handwritten message to her was always the same: "Happy Birthday to Us, Love Steve."

My mom is no longer with us, but "my" birthday will always be "our" day.

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(Note: Photos not published in book)

the backstory:

Two years before being published in the **Chicken Soup for the Soul: Mom Knows Best** book, I wrote *Happy Birthday to Us*. This original version included one special early morning birthday remembrance, and mention of my *forever favorite and beloved strawberry shortcake*, (my birthday cake of choice since, well, forever)! But for whatever editorial reason, my remembrance and my *beloved cake* reference didn't make the final-published in the book version.

Not my choice.

I've long since learned that the editing process many times involves eliminating verbiage for various reasons including clarity, wordiness, and sometimes space considerations—just to name a few. And knowing this, and after reading the publisher's edits and seeing that my original message—and much of my original verbiage, remained intact, I approved (grudgingly), the final-published version.

I remain proud of this piece—both the published version and the original—which, by the way, can be read after the conclusion of the backstory.

and now the rest of the backstory to this piece:

No doubt there are kings and queens in elementary school classrooms today who are wearing their yellow-gold paper birthday crowns—proudly proclaiming, for all to see, that today is their special day.

And of course, it is.

For me, and after decades of birthdays, it's ironic how one awesome gift—in this case, the Sawzall from my mom, could make me realize the paradoxical inequity found in her gifting me for something that she'd done; that I should reap the rewards for her labors. (Oh yeah, pun intended!)

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But don't get me wrong. I'm all for celebrating birthdays, (but these days, not so much my own)!

Instead, and when Mom was still with us, I much more enjoyed recognizing *our* day, with her. It was kind of like my own version of *Mother's Day* meets, well, *my mother's day*!

And for me, every year, when my birthday comes around, it's still *our* day; it will always be *our* day.



My one-time cherubs, back when each was in the first grade, on their birthdays.

and now for the original: (morning remembrance, strawberry shortcake and all, included!)

Happy Birthday to Us!

“...aside from being the blue-eyed blond babbling bundle of joy that caused my parents’ world to change...I’ve done nothing more to merit becoming the recipient of birthday cards and gifts.”

It was *just* what I wanted; it was the *perfect* present; a one size fits all; something that I had long thought of buying for myself but never did. But somehow, my mom, with her special maternal instincts and motherly radar; with her uncanny ability to glean information from snippets of overheard conversations figured it out, all by herself, and in the end, she gave me that *one* gift that I had truly wanted.

Nothing else could ever say, ‘*Happy Birthday, Son*’ like a large gift-wrapped box containing a brand new Sawzall Reciprocating Saw. Well, at least I’m sure that’s what *she* was thinking that year, and to be honest, I could not have agreed with her more!

Two months later, I put my newest favorite tool through its paces while volunteering with my church on a mission trip to Appalachia where we were helping to make homes warmer, safer and drier. My trusty saw and I quite capably resolved a plethora of challenging cutting circumstances with ease and efficiency, and one night, as I was reflecting upon its versatility, I suddenly wondered: what could I have possibly done to deserve such an awesome birthday present, and then, an even greater question came to mind: what does *anyone* ever do to deserve *any* special recognition for nothing more than to have been born?

Both questions somehow intrigued and yet bothered me, at the same time.

It occurred to me that aside from being the blue-eyed blond babbling bundle of joy that caused my parents’ world to change from that of being a team of two to becoming a family of three,

I have done *absolutely nothing* to merit being the fortunate recipient of birthday cards and gifts, of salutations and recognition.

It also occurred to me that if there was any one person who truly deserved acknowledgment for enduring nine long months of daily discomfort which included morning sickness, indigestion, anemia, swollen ankles; if there was one person who truly deserved birthday kudos for once upon a time being pregnant and then giving birth to a towheaded little kid who would one day grow up to become a happy and healthy reciprocating saw-wielding adult, it was my mom.

After all, should all the pertinent details pertaining to my ultimate appearance in this world be made known, this much is readily obvious: I had nothing to do with my own birth, except, of course, to have been present for the festivities.

Suddenly it seemed wrong for my mom to have done all of the work and for me to receive a lifetime of April birthdays blowing out the candles on my forever favorite and beloved strawberry shortcake!

So it was that night in Appalachia, and as I packed away my saw, I knew that I was going to have to do something about this birthday recognition business.



My forever favorite birthday cake of choice:
strawberry shortcake

The following year and on the morning marking the date of my birth, I surprised Mom with a beautiful floral arrangement—my way of acknowledging and sharing with her *our* special day. I would do this several more times over the coming years as we'd mutually note the anniversary celebrating the arrival of her firstborn—me!

Now, getting these annual arrangements to her wasn't always as easy as I might have liked because this senior citizen-Nana lead an active life—one spent in perpetual motion. Knowing this, I soon discovered that it would be her schedule and circumstances that would dictate when and where she might receive the annual acknowledgment recognizing our auspicious occasion.

While some of these deliveries were certainly dispatched to her home, not all of them were. Once, I surprised her by placing them inside her car outside the deli where she often stopped for a midmorning cup of coffee. Another time I had them delivered to the hospital information desk where she was volunteering, while still another year she found them inside the room housing the food pantry at my church where she spent time sorting and bagging donations for distribution.

Although the delivery locations, as well as the arrangements themselves, would differ from year to year, the one thing that never changed was the verbiage on the enclosed card. My handwritten message to her was always the same, *"Happy Birthday to Us, Love Steve."*

I think that she grew to expect her annual floral arrangements and I was more than happy to provide them—they were beautiful reminders of our birthday bond!

The sun was moments from rising, and still, the colors of spring were already clear to see—the bright yellow forsythias running the length of my neighbors' backyard, the linen white buds on the dogwoods; the multi-green colors of the emerging leaves high atop the oaks and maples. I stood outside on that cool April morning, savoring my coffee and basking in the magnificence of this just awakening day.

It was my birthday and I was another year older.

And Mom, well, she's no longer with us, but as sure as I knew that a strawberry shortcake was going to be in my immediate future, I couldn't help thinking about her, after all, it was *our* day. It will always be *our* day, and so I softly whispered, "Happy Birthday to us, Mom."

And you know what? I'm pretty sure that she heard me.



One of my neighbor's forsythias as viewed from my backyard deck

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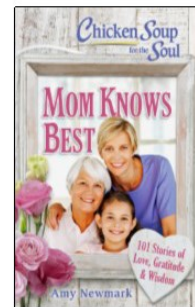
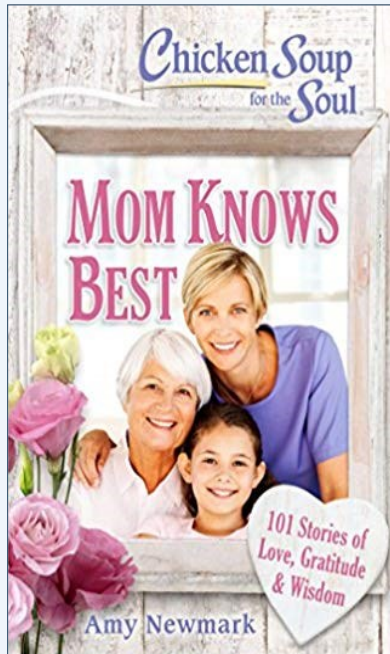
Mom & me, not so long ago



A slice of birthday heaven!



Fresh & frozen strawberries always garnished a slice. We called them *slops*! (Still do!)



"If there was any one person who'd earned kudos for my birth—it was my mom."

from the book anthology:
**Chicken Soup for the Soul
Mom Knows Best**

and my remembrance:
"Happy Birthday to Us"
by
Stephen Rusiniak



My birthday cake, me & Mom!

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