

# A Manner of Speaking

by Bonnie Neugebauer

It's been the nicest sort of day. Nothing spectacular, just several bright connections with people to buoy my spirits as I work my way through piles of projects and hundreds of messages:

- Magela's e-mail about celebrating birthdays in Uruguay.
- "Have a good day" and a wave from the UPS driver.
- My Dad's first e-mail message ever.
- A spring walk with my neighbor.
- A leisurely dinner with family.

My days, the good ones, are built on such moments — reminders that I am a friend, a child, a lover, and a parent. But many of the exchanges that I cherish happen in the company of strangers; finding the trigger that engages the personality within a role can be like a treasure hunt.

I recognized Joe behind the fish counter. He had shared a recipe for ahi the week before, enabling me to prepare my best dish ever. Pleased that I remembered him, he gifted me with a sample of his new crab dip. "We all have our special touches, you know."

As I walk each morning with Lorelee, I greet everyone we meet with a hearty "Good Morning." All ages of children pass by, some too cool, of course to reply. But sometimes a teenager beams a smile at us. I don't know if I touched his life; but he certainly touched mine.

During a recent cooking class, Chef Cory Schreiber from Wildwood Restaurant in Portland, Oregon shared stories of growing up in a fishing family. Later, I talked with him about his rapport with the class: "I think people are interested in more than just how to roll a lamb roast. They like to get to know you as a person. So I tell them stories from my family. We're hungry for human connections; stories satisfy."

If Chef Schreiber is right, then what in the world are we doing? We are being hurled into a future devoid of such interactions.

Vans save us from the necessity of trips to the market. And, even if we choose to make the journey, we can come and go without interacting with a single person, as conveyer belts and self-scanning systems replace customer service. Telecommuting has great benefits, but how do we replace conversations over coffee and group projects? Even the telephone solicitations of real people have been replaced by recorded voices that disrupt our evenings. (Perhaps I should have been kinder to the human callers!) All the technology that was supposed to save us time is sucking it up instead. We are spinning so frantically that really important things are disappearing without notice.

I recently invited someone to dinner who was so taken aback about being invited to a dinner party that she turned me down, then called back later to accept with delight.

We are making choices — many through inattention. Let's stop and consider. Let us approach the future thoughtfully, giving up the things that matter little, rather than the things that give life meaning.