

# Backyard Pearls

**cultivating wisdom and joy  
in everyday life**

*Carolyn A. Scarborough*

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## INTRODUCTION

*backyard: a place in the middle of everyday life*  
*pearl: something of great beauty and value, a miracle*

When people hear the name of this book, they often tilt their head a little, like my dog does when he's confused. It doesn't neatly fit into any of the categories in their brain. And while it's not my desire to confound anyone, I'm also satisfied that it encourages people to slow down and ponder—to wake up to a different way of looking at things.

I believe that happiness isn't "out there." It's right in our own backyard, available at every moment. Yes, that includes the times when we're late for a meeting and the traffic light is stuck on red, or when the back door has been left open, yet again, and a swarm of flies are buzzing around the dishes that were left out.

In the grist of everyday life, pearls—moments of beauty, insight or joy—are always available. It simply takes paying attention to what's right around us and inside us. Before we know it, an "aha" is zinging our direction.

This book of essays isn't theoretical. It takes you right to the heart of everyday life, and then flips it over to illuminate a deeper meaning. After each column, you're given an opportunity to "Discover Your Own Pearls." If you're drawn to explore the topic further, you might read this section and ponder the questions provided, write out your thoughts or take other action steps.

These pieces were written as a series of biweekly newspaper columns. My daughters were 8 and 12 when the

## *Introduction*

first column ran, and I continued writing for four years. Like all women, the topics here reflect the stage I was in at the time. Before children were my glamorous days as travel editor for international magazines. The stories in *Backyard Pearls* reflect my period of staying at home to raise the girls as I freelanced on the side. Today, I'm in yet another stage as a life coach, writer and mother of teenagers. All these stages have been equally phenomenal—as long as I resisted comparing one to another and simply settled into where I was in that moment.

My hope is that you can pick up this book and find inspiration and laughter any time you are in need of a pearl. Even more, I wish for you a life overflowing with your own pearls, a daily adventure in transforming the mundane to the miraculous... all in your own backyard.



## WOMAN... INTERRUPTED

*"The great thing is, if one can, to stop regarding all the unpleasant things as interruptions in one's 'own' or 'real' life. The truth is, of course, that what one regards as interruptions are precisely one's life."*

— C. S. Lewis

**T**he moment I sat down to write this column, it happened again. The doorbell rang, and out front stood a scruffy man wearing a soiled white undershirt.

"Roofin' company," he said.

"Roofing?" I said. "I didn't know you were coming today, nobody called."

"I know," he said bluntly. "Don't much like the phone. I'm here to fix the roof."

I have no idea why I was surprised. After all, it fit the pattern. In fact, I hadn't even seen the pattern until it came to me — at 3:14 a.m. — when my sleep was interrupted by a flailing arm from my husband's side of the bed. As I lay there half awake, I realized my life could be summed up in two words.

Woman... interrupted.

Take writing, for instance. Before children, I had uninterrupted flows of time to dream and scribble away. Now, it's become more like interval training — write, start the bath, write, help with homework, write, find matching socks, write, point the plumber to the leaky faucet.

And then there's phone conversation... interrupted. The phone rings. You pick it up. It's your long lost friend whom you haven't spoken to in ten years and she has big news. That's when the kid radar kicks in. They know, from three rooms away, when it's an important call. They'll drop everything just to come running in with something CRITICAL, something that needs attending to NOW. Like, how they should dress next year for Halloween?

Or, a sibling fight breaks out. If you're on a work related telephone call, the fight is guaranteed to be twice as loud. If there's a dog in the vicinity, being on the same radar kids are, it'll add to the noise. Same with UPS delivery men.

We all know bathroom time... interrupted. Before kids, this was a private function. But when mine were young, I couldn't even close the door. When they got older, the door closed and conversations happened through it, unless of course something desperately needed to be fixed, in which case said door opened again. If the phone rang (odds of which increase when you walk in the bathroom) you could hear, "No, she can't come to the phone, she's on the potty and she's been there a long time..."

Any parent of young children knows mealtime... interrupted. When Alix was an infant, we'd put her in a swing during mealtime, giving us approximately four minutes to snarf down our meal. Later, we braved trips to restaurants with colorful plastic glasses. Spousal conversation sputtered out in sound bites. "Guess what – I got a promotion!" "I'm thirsty." "Promotion?! When did..." "Oops, water spilled." "...that happen?" "My crayon broke." "Yesterday, my..."

And when was the last time you watched a grown up movie at home, beginning to end, in peace? (Yes, movie interruptus.) A two-hour movie at our house can take a week to watch. By the end, we've forgotten the beginning. Of course, 80 percent of the interruptions are food-related. So, theoretically, if you pile a mountain of munchies in front of the children as they watch their show in another room, you're safe.

But no. All that food, of course, means arguments over

who gets what food. Or whose food spilled, and now needs to be cleaned up. Or whose tummy hurts from eating too much food.

About the only time kids don't interrupt is when you're standing in their messy room, scratching your chin like perhaps a cleanup is in order. Then they're not only quiet, they flat out disappear.

So, why do we do it? We were once blissfully selfish, able to start and finish a complete thought, a complete romantic dinner for two, a complete novel... without interruption. We had career paths, not career detours. Why did we throw all that aside for a life of fits and starts, stop and go? A life where children – and roofers – appear without warning?

We do it because, ironically, we need a life with interruptions. Interruptions teach us to open our hearts to each other – even when we'd rather turn away. They bind us together in daily rhythms of give and take. They humanize us. And deep down, we long to be interrupted from our headlong rush through this short life.

Interrupted... from the day's horrible headlines by a tender, sweaty hug. From our loneliness by a spouse's flickering kiss. From our bad mood by a child wearing nothing but a pink boa and oversized cowboy boots.

Yes, we're interrupted by love... in all its messy glory.

### ***Discover Your Own Pearls***

Pay attention every time you're interrupted, whether it's by your child or a ringing phone. See what thoughts immediately come up. See how long it takes for you to "get back on track." Finally (since they're going to happen anyway), see if there's a way to embrace rather than resist your interruptions...



## LIVING IN THE PAUSE

*"The time to relax is when you don't have time for it."*

— attributed to both Jim Goodwin  
and Sydney J. Harris

**H**ave you ever tried looking at your life upside down? Take to-do lists, for instance. We're used to looking at our daily lists for confirmation we've accomplished something. Eighteen checks is a good day. Only two? We bombed.

But what if we judged a successful day not by the tasks performed, but by the distractions? Didn't finish your laundry today because you took a nap? Woo hoo! The dusting took three hours instead of one because you stopped to play Scrabble with your kids? Way to go!

Just imagine if staying on a task, beginning to end, was a sign of failure? What if the Puritan work ethic was... wrong?

The other day I was tackling a mountain of filing that was growing like kudzu in my inbox. I had to leave for a writer's tea in an hour. Time was limited. Then my sister called. It was important, she said. I looked at the pile, every inch of me yearning to make it disappear. Then I heard my sister's voice and with a sigh abandoned it for a conversation on the front porch.

An hour later, driving to the tea, I thought about how I had released the project in favor of the conversation. At first I scolded myself. Then I remembered the words of Artur

Schnabel as he discussed piano playing. “The notes I handle no better than many pianists,” he said. “But the pauses between the notes – ah, that is where the art resides!”

Exactly, I thought. It is the pauses between the notes – or in this case, meaningful meanderings in the middle of tasks – where what’s worthwhile lies. Sometimes we get caught up in our “human doing” side and lose track of our equally important “human being” side.

Pauses like the one with my sister shift me from a thinking, task orientation to a feeling, people orientation. I call those “people pauses.” That’s where I’m paying the bills, totally focused, and my daughter Chloe will come and sit on my lap and ask where her pet goldfish went when it died. I want to finish the bills; I need to talk with her. So, I shift focus for 10 minutes. Nothing gets checked off my to-do list immediately, but everything that is important happens. When I hold too tightly onto the expectation of completing my list in a certain way and certain time frame, it doesn’t open me to all the possibilities for a richer, more heart-centered life that come up along the way.

The other day an item in my planner was to brush the dog. As I slid the comb over his coat in the back yard, I noticed his gaze move towards the sky. I looked up, too, and saw two striking red birds swooping through the early morning sky before diving behind a scarlet-tipped bush. I was struck by the beauty. Had I intently stayed focused on finishing my task, I would have missed a moment of grace. A “beauty pause.”

Other times, our pauses are about going inward when we’ve been too “outward.” I can be in the middle of a project with others and find myself getting angrier and angrier about something. Then I remember the “breathing pause.” I’ll leave and take some deep, calming breaths. I gather myself in, like a bird drawing in disparate twigs for a nest, and feel myself coming together again. I go back out a different person. By stopping to be a human “just being,” I’m able to be a better human while I’m doing.

“Gratitude pauses” also catch me sometimes. I may be in the shower sudsing when I notice the light shining through

the steam and suddenly appreciate that we have money for electricity, for water and even cash to feed the dog who sleeps by the bathroom door.

So at the end of the day, what if we gave ourselves a pat on the back instead of a scolding when only two items are checked off? What if we look back at everything that wasn't on the list to begin with, and yet happened nevertheless? The hugs. The moment admiring the first spring bloom. The sweet snatches of solitude where we paused, remembering why we're here on Earth.

That's when we stop and add another line to our list. It reads "Life well lived." Check.

### ***Discover Your Own Pearls***

Next time you're in the middle of a task, notice if you're rigidly attached to finishing it in a certain way and in a certain time frame? It's fine to plan, but if you need to stop for a moment, can you? Or do you bulldoze through with casualties (including yourself) on the roadside?



## THE INVISIBLE WOMAN

*“The sage holds to the inner-light,  
and is not moved by the passing show.”*

— Lao Tzu

She didn't exactly walk into the room. Rather, she made an entrance, sweeping in with her plaid mini skirt — sheer almost up to her thighs — her feathered hat and large, clanking bracelets. My sister and I sat sipping our vanilla lattes in Borders' café as this woman and her gaggle of beret-topped friends whooshed over to the table next to ours. Heads turned. Snippets of their conversation spiked the quiet room, enticing tidbits like “hiking in Thailand,” “experimental theater” and “sweat lodges.”

Suddenly, I had the feeling again. The feeling various of my friends have secretly discussed. The feeling of being invisible.

It wasn't always like that. I used to be cool. I'd tell stories of the time I caught a plane to Haiti on a whim, unbeknownst to my family, and found myself in the middle of a voodoo ceremony and later almost sold into white slavery. With my long blonde ponytail on the side of my head, I went to New York one summer with my mother. I wore a wild, glittery belt and scrunchy capris, and as we passed actress Dyan Cannon on the street, I fancied that she gave me an admiring look. I was making my way in the world, trying a little of this and that as I explored my limits.

Yet here I was, more than 20 years later, inconspicuous in

my Levis and navy sweat shirt bought on a trip long ago. Instead of funky retro heels, my feet toasted in scuffed tennis shoes, worn from carrying sleeping children up the stairs and chasing runaway pets down the street. My unpolished nails had opened more packages of batteries than swept over a lover's chest. My hair was the two minute, blow-dried "natural" look rather than the smart styles out of "Vogue."

Even my car wasn't cool. When it's time for the valet to pull around the vehicles at black tie affairs, my husband and I wait in line as sports cars zip by, followed by the heave and gasp of my big green mini-van. Once, I interviewed race car driver Eddie Cheever Jr. for a magazine article, and he said I could drive a lap around the racetrack. Woo hoo – there I was going a good, oh, 50 miles-per-hour in my matronly machine.

So there I sat, blending into the blue topped tables, pondering where I had failed. And then I remembered the butterflies.

I had been reading on the front porch of my house a while back when I glanced over at the bushes and observed that one branch seemed almost, well, alive. I looked more closely and saw a few narrow bands of butterfly wings, their bodies still as they blended into the browns. As they sat in the slant of warm afternoon sun, I realized that while I barely noticed them because of camouflage, they still had the ability to notice everything else, from the breeze carrying the honeyed scent of white Lantana blossoms to the coarse leaves heavy after a rainfall. Just like me, they could see. See clearly. Even if they weren't always seen.

Behind my Mona Lisa smile, a warm comprehension came. Sometimes we forget that we make our way through this life not in order to be noticed, but in order to see from a deep, rich place. That interior place, I realized, had grown deeper and more beautiful through the years. Just as the butterfly does its simple daily task of pollinating, I do my daily rituals – chopping garlic for the lasagna, showing up at a recital, tucking away strands of hair and hurt feelings. It doesn't take the exotic and spectacular to grow. Just daily life, lived consciously, with love.

The girl who tested limits in high school is still there. But she's pushing the limits inward, rather than outward. She's journeying through patience instead of Patagonia, brightening her eyes with wisdom instead of mascara. She may not stand out in a crowd, but she's cool where it counts — on the inside.

***Discover Your Own Pearls***

Have you seen your definition of “cool” change over the years? What's cool to you now, both outwardly and — more importantly — inwardly? Are there any areas where you're focused more outwardly than you'd like to be? Finally, sit quietly for five minutes and acknowledge your inner beauty.