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Inspiration through laughter

I told my daughter Erin to kiss the plush toy llama I held. She replied, “I don’t want to kiss a llama!” Thus was born a poem and book that has brought laughter to thousands of families. I am always amazed at the inspiration that comes my way from people, animals, dreams and nature. We need to learn to laugh again after this year of pandemic. I hope to help!

How I became a poet and storyteller

Words have always been fun for me! I remember making people groan when I made puns as a boy. In 2002 when I began writing poems on a regular basis, I found that a punch line is much more fun when paired with rhyme. The outcome is often surprising to me, and that surprise translates to others as well. And when the poems are of a more serious nature, I find that rhythm and rhyme combined can put words together that lead to an element of truth that might otherwise have been missed. Most of the time I present my poems orally, so talks and book signings have been a regular part of my schedule. If there’s anything I enjoy as much as writing a poem, it is watching the wonder on the faces of children and adults when I get to tell it to them. I began going to Branson in 2003 and the St. Louis Zoo in 2004. Then, in 2006, I started book signing at Grant’s Farm. There I became a weekend regular for storytelling and absolutely loved it! I have been a part of the daily program at the farm since 2016 when I retired from full-time employment elsewhere.

. . . and then an illustrator!

Someone had to illustrate my children’s book *I Don’t Want to Kiss a Llama!* and, being a poet, I couldn’t afford anyone else but me! I love matching drawings or photographs with poems because it helps me reach the audience in a whole new way. With the pandemic and the lack of a live

audience, I have posted some of the pictures and photographs to my website, to my Facebook account, and to other social media sites.

Not just children’s books!

I first knew I had discovered something special when the teenage boys in my Scout troop laughed at and looked forward to my original “Scoutmaster Minutes”, i.e., my poems, in 2002. After all, how many teenage boys like poetry? I also remember reciting “Chubby Dinosaur” poems to two brothers, a high school and a college student, at the Storybook Sweets store at Grant’s Farm. We talked so long that they were late to meet their parents elsewhere in the park! And I have shared my stories with civic groups, retirees, and with schools in urban, rural and suburban areas. It’s fun to make people laugh!

Books are a big family!

I am author of 19 children’s and poetry books with a circulation somewhere upwards of 60,000. (I stopped counting after 40,000.) About a dozen of those are currently available at [www.idontwanttokissallama.com/shop](http://www.idontwanttokissallama.com/shop). I am the copyright owner of all my writings and write almost every day, pretty much whenever the words want to come and play. I’ve performed some of my poems so many times that my muscles remember what to do, what to say, and when to turn pages! I am a better person because of the power of poetry. With it, I hope to help others find their own unique voices.

Recognition

For me, the biggest recognition has always been the light in the eyes of children and their loved ones as they hear and laugh with a story. There was the legally blind boy who put his face to the pages of *Dale the Uniclyde*

as I recited it by memory and as his mother watched and cried with happiness. And there was the nine-year-old shy and reluctant reader who laughed and learned with her teacher as they read *I Don’t Want to Kiss a Llama!* over and over again. She recited it with me to one class, then by herself in front of another one! Life changed that day for her, and also for me. I often use puppets with the books to connect with the children. It sometimes helps with the adults, too!

Grant’s Farm has invited me back for storytelling and book signings every year since I started in 2006 although the season was cancelled last year due to the pandemic. I have greeted thousands of guests and sent my books all around Missouri, the United States, and the world. I consider it a great recognition that Grant’s Farm thinks enough of me to find me a place there every year!

It was experiences like these that caught the attention of the mayor of Byrnes Mill here in Jefferson County. In 2011, I was awarded the title of *poet laureate* of Byrnes Mill, Missouri. I wrote a poem for the new playground and it was inscribed on a plaque that stands there to this day.

It is a small thing in a big world and yet through this I learned that such recognition helps people see their own good qualities.

For example, in *The Wizard of Oz*, the Cowardly Lion is brave long before he receives his medal. But the recognition he receives causes HIM to realize that he is brave. He literally becomes bigger as he puffs up his chest! I hope I would grow in similar fashion as Missouri’s *poet laureate* and give our children and their families reason to smile and laugh again! Actually, I know I would. I just don’t know the exact manifestations of that growth. But I’d love to find out!

Previous Work Experience

As a community organizer, sales representative and territory manager for the Boy Scouts of America for 32 years, I consistently helped the program grow wherever I was called to serve. Accomplishments that still make me smile include the acquisition of land for a camp in Laredo, TX and funding of minority outreach programs for councils in both Corpus Christi and Wichita Falls. TX. Those made a positive difference that continues to this very day. We moved to Byrnes Mill in 2000 and I retired here in 2016.

Formal Education

Valedictorian\*, Isidore Newman High School, New Orleans, LA in 1975

B.S. in Chemical Engineering, University of Tulsa in 1979 with 4.0 GPA\*

M.S. in Human Services, Murray State University in 1996 with 4.0 GPA\*

\*I followed well the path laid out for me until I found my own.

**I am frequently asked to give writing advice My best answers almost always come as a poem. Here is mine. I hope you get a chance to read more at** [**www.idontwanttokissallama.com/portfolio**](http://www.idontwanttokissallama.com/portfolio)**. Thank you for reading, and for writing!**

**A POOR POET’S ADVICE**

**Study. Practice.  Read.**

**If you’re going to be a writer**

**there are several things you’ll need.**

**Grow imagination.**

**What’s it like to be a bird?**

**Listen to your grandma.**

**There is wisdom in each word.**

**Learn vocabulary.**

**Know each grammar rule**

**and don’t forget to have some fun**

**even while at school.**

**Take a walk on sunny days**

**and sometimes in the rain.**

**Let your mind explore**

**things you can’t explain.**

**Watch for inspiration**

**and catch it when it comes.**

**Find it in the whispering wind**

**or the beat of distant drums.**

**Write when you’re inspired**

**and write when you are not.**

**If you want to be a writer**

**you have to write a lot!**

**Find a place that’s special**

**and likewise time to spend**

**so writing is as natural**

**as meeting an old friend.**

**Find someone you can read to**

**who loves you just enough**

**to tell you when your story’s good**

**and when it’s kind of rough.**

**When you get a chance**

**read it to a crowd.**

**There’s nothing like an author**

**who dares to read out loud.**

**Do you remember taking books**

**to your mom when you were three?**

**Loving books and writing them**

**sets ideas free.**

**And while it might be nice to have**

**money, fame and glory**

**the greatest joy a writer gets**

**is discovering a story.**

So my daughter Erin is responsible for this, my most popular poem that has become my most popular book. I had a stuffed toy llama and told her, “Erin, kiss the llama!” She replied with the words, “I don’t want to kiss a llama!” and my life changed forever. Yes, God can tell you anything when you listen, and sometimes when you don’t.

I DON’T WANT TO KISS A LLAMA!

I don’t want to kiss a llama

Though they’re cute I must admit

But when they pucker up

It’s ’cause they’re going to spit!

I don’t want to kiss a giraffe!

They stand much too tall, you see.

I’d have to stand on tiptoes

Just to kiss one on the knee!

I’d never kiss an elephant!

Its skin is much too tough.

Besides, its trunk gets in the way

And my lips aren’t long enough!

I wouldn’t kiss a penguin

On its orange-colored beak!

I’m afraid it might take out an eye

When it pecked me on the cheek!

BUT . . . I would kiss a llama,

Penguin, or giraffe!

I’d even kiss an elephant

If it would make you laugh.

Yes, I would give a kiss

To each animal at the zoo

But I’d rather save them all

And give every one to you!

Half of my book sales carry this title which makes it my personal best seller!

I am always happy to recite it. Always!

Our cat Star inspired the following poem. She liked to watch the birds and one day I tried to carry her outside. But she didn’t want to go outside. She just wanted to watch the birds. So she inspired me with her claws!

TREED OFF

I don’t think she’d ever been outside.

It’s a place she never goes,

But there she was high in a tree!

How she got there no one knows.

That cat was wailing wildly!

It broke my heart to hear her cry.

Before I called the firemen

I thought I’d give it one good try.

I went and got a ladder,

Set it up against the tree,

Whispered softly to the cat,

“Don’t worry now, it’s me.”

But the cat who’d warmed my lap

One many a winter’s night

Somehow saw a snarling bear

And clawed at me in fright!

I drew my hand back quickly

But it was badly tattered!

I lost my balance, grabbed a branch,

For I was now “unladdered”.

And now just like the frightened cat

I could not get down.

The phone was in the house

And ’twas an hour’s drive from town.

When the firemen finally came

The cat was calm and mellow,

But I was bleeding pretty bad

And my underwear was yellow!

Yes, I, too, can laugh about it now

But it surely wasn’t fun,

And next time my cat gets in the tree

I’m calling nine-one-one!

A kindergarten teacher told me her students “all know about yellow underwear”

so this one gets my personal “Kindergarteners’ Loudest-Laughter Award”.

The next one hits closer to home though.

ETERNITY FOR AN OLD MAN

**It's a moment that gets longer even as it nears**

**’cause the bathroom's always further than it first appears.**

**CURSE OF THE CAMEL**

**I had a dream this morning  
attacked by hungry goats  
which led me to write this,  
one of my oddest anecdotes.   
They were munching on my clothes  
as goats all tend to do  
when one of them began to talk  
instead of chew.   
"What'cha doin' here?"  
it asked in Rural-ese.   
"Don't 'cha know we bite  
and you could catch our fleas?  
This here is a dream   
so I'll turn into a camel!"  
and right away it grew a hump  
and spat just like that mammal!  
I shook my head and wiped my face  
and hollered ,"Go away!"  
but the camel said, "Not a chance!  
You have school today!"  
"What an awful nightmare!"  
I grumbled and I groaned.  
"Worse if you don't get up now!"  
the camel then intoned.  
I was so confused  
I opened up my eyes  
and standing there was – My Mom! -  
much to my surprise,  
and in her hand a bucket,  
a lunch bag and my books  
and on her face the worst I've seen  
of her "You're in trouble!" looks.  
So I struggled to my feet  
and put my clothes on - Quick!  
I didn't tell my mom  
but I really did feel sick.**

***SHE TURNED INTO A CAMEL!***

**What an awful curse  
but I had to go to school  
and that's a whole lot worse!**

**The camels, goats and school-age guests at Grant’s Farm combined to inspire me**

**with this poem one busy day at Storybook Sweets. I’ll give it my**

**“Written on the Spot (or is that Spit?) Award”.**

IVAN THE TERRIER AND THE ROLL OF TOILET PAPER

I have often said

That Ivan is determined.

He is ever eager

To ensure the yard’s “de-vermined”.

Now I have always kept

The bathroom closed up tight

But I did not this morning

And Ivan saw the light.

I had several errands

So I left him all alone.

Thus Ivan the Inquisitor

Went exploring on his own.

I know not why he chose the paper

Hanging on the spool

But he had to chase it to the end.

That’s a terrier’s rule.

His task was just completed

When I got back home

And it was pretty easy

To see where that dog did roam.

I could tell by his expression

That he was very proud

And though I was quite angry

I had to laugh out loud.

I picked up all the paper

As Ivan wagged his stub

And because he is so cute

Gave his head a rub.

I know I should have punished him

But for this reason I could not:

For love and trust he’s just about

The best friend that I’ve got.

Check out my Facebook page for many stories about our rat terrier Neko, aka Ivan the Terrier. It’s the moniker I gave her in my poems after a dream one morning in 2003.

DIAPERS AND HOMEWORK

To me are the same.

Nothing is different save for the name.

What’s in a diaper? I’m thinking you knew

And when I’m done with my homework

It will be full of it, too!

My revenge as I always had to do my homework as soon as I got home from school.

THINKING UPSIDE DOWN

I had a dream this morning

And I think I was a bat

’casue I was hanging upside down!

How can they think like that?

“Keep your feet off of the ceiling!”

That’s what my mother said.

“If you put your feet up

Your blood all rushes to your head!”

So how is it that mother bats

Have this lesson switched about?

For when you think upside down

It creates odd looks and doubt!

We say that bats are “batty”,

Their flight so unpredictable.

It’s names like that we people use

To make others’ thoughts “constrictable”.

Yet a bat can catch ten thousand bugs

And I can’t swat a fly

And if I’m thinking for myself

I can figure out just why.

Yes, anyone who’s different

Is called a freak or clown

But sometimes great advancements come

From thinking upside down!

I was lying on the couch and felt dizzy like I was hanging upside down.

Somehow it doesn’t feel like I should get an award for being lazy! (I didn’t.)

But I love the poem and sold over 4,000 books with that title.

The Chubby Dinosaur is a series of silly poems, word plays, and puns.

Chubby is a harmless T-Rex who only wants to make you laugh, not make you lunch!

With that in mind, I hope you get a chuckle from him.

THE CHUBBY DINOSAUR

I saw a chubby dinosaur at the restaurant today

Talking to the manager. Here’s what I heard them say.

“I’ve come to talk with you about the waiter you just ate!”

“Oh, yes!” said the chubby dinosaur. “Do I get the employee rate?”

I saw a chubby dinosaur at the theater today

Talking to the manager. Here’s what I heard them say.

“I hope you can explain why you ate the whole ballet!”

“Oh, my!” said the chubby dinosaur. “I thought it said, ‘Buffet!’”

There are more on the website if you think you can stand it!

TEN THOUSAND MONKEYS

We’d buy ten thousand monkeys

If that would make you glad

If just to hear you say

You love your Mom and Dad.

We’d feed them every one

And every single day

But we’d have to each take second jobs

And third ones for more pay.

There’s nothing that we wouldn’t give

To hear your happy laughter

But wouldn’t for the jabbering

And all the cleaning after.

We’d buy ten thousand monkeys

For just a single kiss

But if we’re afraid that if we did

There’d be so much we’d all miss.

That would be your growing up

Because we’d be so busy

So today we’re only getting one.

More would make us dizzy!

We want to be your heroes!

It’s what parents long to do

Which means our most important job

Is spending time with you!

Trauma can lead to poems, even funny ones. The one above came to me after a dad and daughter had a “discussion” about the number of stuffed toy monkeys they could buy. The poem helps children understand financial limits, but they still want the ten thousand monkeys! Now for another lesson with . . .

THE CAVEMAN AND THE PILLAR OF ICE

The caveman never listened to his mom’s advice

And licked and stuck his tongue to a pillar made of ice.

He talked back to his mother and now he’s paid the price

But this one thing is certain: He’ll never do it twice!

But I did it twice! Mom nixed the next TWO poems, but “King Louie” (next page) won

honorable mention at a poetry contest in Chesterfield years ago. I got a certificate!

THE CHUBBY DINOSAUR

I saw a chubby dinosaur in medieval Florence today

Talking to a baker. Here’s what I heard them say.

“Why did you want sugar when you ate the rulers of our town?”

“Heard it in a song,” said the chubby dinosaur.

“A spoonful of sugar helps ‘de ’Medici’ go down!”

KING LOUIE’S HORSE’S BUTT: A LOVE STORY

An art museum for the fair,

St Louie in ought-four,

And a statue of his highness

Like he’s riding out the door!

The museum’s full of treasures

From the Louvre and old King Tut

But as I leave I come face-to-face with King Louie’s horse’s butt!

It doesn’t seem appropriate

At his big tail to stare

And I wonder what they did

To get it so high up in the air.

A girl came up behind me.

She smiled so I said, “What?”

She said, “I think that yours is cuter than King Louie’s horse’s butt.”

I was quite astounded

But I kind of liked the line

And when I got to know her

I vowed to make her mine.

We two think so much alike

As from one stone we’re cut

So the two of us got married under King Louie’s horse’s butt!

We still visit the museum

And walk in Forest Park

And at night we hold each other’s hands

And kiss there in the dark.

If I tell you where we like to kiss

You’ll think that I’m a nut.

We stand in moonlit shadows of King Louie’s horse’s butt!

I know the statue will be there

When we are old and gray

For our love, like that old horse’s butt,

Will never go away.

And on our anniversary

Up museum steps I’ll strut

To kiss my wife and wave at King Louie’s horse’s butt!

I wonder what we look like

From that pedestal above

And where our tale would rank

In the history of love.

But you would be quite lucky

Before life’s book is shut

If you could have a love like ours and King Louie’s horse’s butt.

(I based this one on the statue and the unusual courtship my wife and I shared.

We did not meet there, but if we had this is what would have happened!)

I didn’t even bother to ask my Mom about this next poem! But I jumped out of a helicopter into a lake once, too, and didn’t ask permission. Luckily, I only got wet!

THE DINOSAUR’S LINGERIE

The dino’s wife told him to buy her lingerie

But he didn’t have a clue and knew not what to say.

Instead he chose to ask her, “Dear, what do you weigh?”

Which is the reason dinosaurs are extinct today!

It is this different kind of thinking that my Mom’s sister, Winnifred Laubach, inspired.

This poem is dedicated to her and was included in the *Goose River Anthology* in 2011.

ADVICE FROM MY AUNT WINNIE

The advice from my Aunt Winnie

When my ears were turning red

Was clear, concise, and firm:

“Put that cap back on your head!”

But it wasn’t only practical.

She was kind and wise

And the words she said could often

Take you by surprise.

There was the time I lost

My very favorite toy

And she knew just what to say

To help that little boy.

“I’ve looked everywhere,” I said,

“That it could ever be!”

“Then look somewhere it couldn’t!”

And her words helped me to see

Not only just the toy I found

But other things as well:

Ideas, dreams and meaning

In the stories I now tell.

“Dare to think and dare to dream

And seek out your own way!”

Advice from my Aunt Winnie

I’ve followed to this day.

Aunt Winnie would have liked the next poem. I only brought the hippos home in my imagination, however. Good thing, too!

HIPPOS AT HOME

I only brought one hippo home when the zoo had three

So I don’t understand why Mom’s mad at me.

She says it will be lonely but I don’t think that’s true

Because I saw my brother get the other two!

This will NOT be the poem I’ll submit to the state about Missouri.

Read the poem and guess if I grew up in the city or was a country kid!

MULES IN MISSOURI

I have a stubborn mule that hasn’t got a clue.

It won’t pull my plow like the horses do.

I push and pull and push and pull but its feet are stuck like glue

And it’s a very stupid mule ’cause it keeps saying, “MOO!”

My mom grew up liking pigs. I grew up liking buffets!

A PIG IS A PIG

It can be little or it can be big.

No matter the size a pig is a pig.

And people are people be they tiny or tall

But serve the buffet and we’re pigs one and all!

My wife Sharon really like the poem below. And she loves the flowers, too!

ROSES

Soft and velvet to the touch, a beauty to the eye,

A fragrance sweetly gentle with thorns that make you cry.

“Just so much like life,” the philosopher supposes.

“I can live with thorns but not without the roses.”

My brother once texted to ask me what I was doing. I texted back, “Old man sleeping.”

Then I wrote this. Inspiration is everywhere. Be ready for it!

OLD MAN SLEEPING

Old man sleeping. Dangerous.

His mind’s filled up with dreams.

Too weak to hold them back

they spill out through its seams.

He whispers them to children

in a story or a tale

whose hands and hearts renew

what long were weak and frail.

The man keeps telling stories.

He knows ‘tis not too late

for a parable is precious

and its power truly great.

Old man speaking. Passionate.

Puts everyone to sleep

and as they dream the children

decide which ones to keep.

I have presented my poems to the third graders at Blevins Elementary School in Eureka, Missouri, every year since 2010. In 2014 I compared reading to riding a horse in a ring and writing your own work to it galloping across the prairie. Two girls suggested I write a poem with that theme and “The Sunset Stallion” is the result. It was accepted for the *Goose River Anthology* in 2017. It is also the title of one of my books of poetry.

THE SUNSET STALLION

The broken horse would never

test the paddock gate

for it would surely fear

an undirected fate.

The bridle and the saddle

are the only world it knows

and guided by the fence

round and round it goes.

I have never seen it

lift its head to look

nor shown inclination

to cross the shallow brook.

It never would have wondered

how it felt to race the wind

nor e'er aspired to be

imagination's friend.

Slow and sure the easy path

to shelter and its feed,

its spirit's insignificant

and easy to concede.

And so I left the gate unlatched

just by happenstance

unconcerned the plodding horse

would dare to take the chance.

But there! The open gate

tells me I was wrong.

A stallion in the sunset

gallops – bold and strong!

Nostrils flared and ears laid back

it scarcely touches ground.

Freedom it desired

and freedom it has found!

The gate is now wide open

to nevermore be closed.

The stallion craved that freedom

more than I supposed.

And as I watch I wonder

if I let my fancy run

if it would pass the racing horse

and catch the setting sun.

If I have time for one more poem, I’d like to read this one. I wrote “The Gift Horse” just before my latest book, “T-Rex Terrific!” was published and put it in that book.

THE GIFT HORSE

The gift horse

Is missing a tooth.

It is quite apparently

Well beyond its youth.

It has some snags and tangles

In its shaggy mane

As it stands outside the barn

In the pouring rain.

I shake my head and open

The door to let it in

And notice there’s a sore

On its front left shin.

The first sound that it hears from me

Is a disappointed sigh

But I can sense its gratitude

As it looks me in the eye.

That puzzles me for all I see

In that eye’s reflection

Is another human face

Scowling with rejection.

It nuzzles me and softly neighs

And my heart begins to warm

That with such reluctance

Gave shelter from the storm.

I dry it off and brush it

And its coat begins to shine.

I bring it oats and grain

And sit and watch it dine.

And in the days that follow

The gift horse starts to mend

As does that frozen heart of mine

For it has found a friend.

I love to watch it canter

Happily at play

And when it hears my voice

Turn its head my way.

For everything I give

Tenfold it returned,

The lesson that, from this old horse,

Lately I have learned.

It’s too old to pull a plow.

It will never win a race.

The gift I got was not the horse.

It was joyful, heartfelt grace.

And that grace gives me a vision

Of a better world to be.

O! What a wondrous gift it is

For once-blind eyes to see!

December 5, 2019