

A Good Cup of Decaf

The newsletter you can ponder in the time it takes to drink a good cup of decaf.

By Dory Oda

Season 1, Vol. 1

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The latest on my novel, *The Decaffeination of Sammie Houston*.

I've been working on this novel for years, and finally, the time has come to say, "It's now or never." The rewrite I'm doing now is the final one, Lord willing. After that, either I'll publish, or I'll set the whole manuscript aside indefinitely, maybe permanently.

It's kind of a big deal for me right now, so I might call on you for help with various things along the way.

Here's the main idea of the book: It's a coming-of-age story about Sammie, a thirty-something single woman who believes cutting back on caffeine, and moving away from her family and her hometown, is the answer to all her problems. She's not prepared for the emotional tsunami that ensues after 15-year-old hurts surface, her best efforts at reconciliation fail, and her niece runs away on Sammie's watch.

Live Like You're Well

My other work in process – a non-fiction, self-help book on living with chronic disease/ pain.

Why? Because I have Parkinson's Disease. If you face something similar, I want you to know that together, we can make it. Together, we can be joyful. Together, we can share the faith and hope that will see us through another day. Take my hand. You are not forgotten.

French Fries and Other Dalliances

This column isn't just about French fries. It's about the guilty pleasures we all enjoy, the luxuries we all think we're entitled to. But... *When prepared*

properly, French fries just happen to top my list. So, it's where we're going to start. Here are my standards for French fries done right!

1. Must be gluten-free, so not battered.
2. Must be "burn-your-fingers" hot.
3. Must be fresh, NOT just hot from being fried twice (who wants all that extra grease?! Yuck!)
4. Must be properly salted.

There's no shame in sending back French fries that aren't to your standard. If you don't want to send them back, at least don't eat them! They have WAY too many calories, fat, and carbs to just randomly push them into your mouth! (i.e., not a health food).

The Gluten-Free Forum

You'll find all things gluten-free here: tips, recipes, places to eat out, where/how to find the least expensive gluten-free pantry staples, and more.

We've covered a lot of ground in this first edition already, so for today, how about if I just share my favorite recipe for fast, easy gluten-free cookies?

Dory's Favorite Cookies:

- 1 gluten-free cake mix, any flavor
- 2 eggs
- 1/2 cup oil
- 1/2 cup chocolate chips, nuts, etc.
- Instructions:

Mix first 3 ingredients, then stir in chocolate chips (optional). Drop by spoonful on parchment paper and bake at 350 about 9 minutes. Do not overbake (cookies should still look a bit doughy when they come out). Let stand 10 minutes before serving to allow the cookies to set up. These cookies stay soft and fresh about 3 days.

Bonus Materials

You know, the extras: whipped cream, flavored creamer, syrup, an extra shot...

Whatever's been chewing around the edges of my mind the last little while, whatever might be bearing
down on me that might benefit us both to share,

Whatever God wants me to say that I may not have said yet.

If there have been any "extras," find them here.

And... here's our first one!

The Magic Inside

A Tribute to Miss Altum

From a student in your first class of 6th graders

1972-1973

By the time I met Miss Altum, I had survived Mrs. Turner, Mrs. Nichols, Mrs. Evans, Mr. Ruark, Mrs. Cole, Mr. Simmons, and Miss McGinnis, as well as a moderately-sized cache of other teachers whose names I do not now remember.

Mrs. Turner's bottom shook when she sharpened pencils for her first-grade class, and everyone around me laughed. But not me. I was so afraid of Mrs. Turner that once I silently peed down my leg, rather than ask to go to the restroom.

Mrs. Nichols taught math to me. Presumably. That's all I remember of second grade.

Mrs. Evans brought a book to me at my house as I recuperated from a tonsillectomy in third grade. I loved that book. It was called "The Best Loved Doll," and she signed the inside front cover "Get well soon. Love, Mrs. Evans."

In fourth grade, Mr. Ruark let me read aloud to the class two straight chapters of our history books because everyone knew I was the best reader, we were a bit behind, and he had work to do at his desk.

In fifth grade, Mrs. Cole let me stay in from recess because I was quiet and didn't bother her while she graded papers. That same year, Mr. Simmons moved me to the front of the room and told my mother I needed glasses.

And somewhere along the way, my music teacher, Miss McGinnis made me want to sing about the Erie Canal, the Red River Valley, the Titanic, and the Great Chicago Fire. Learning about tragic historical events and singing about them made them real and unforgettable. That was the first time in my young life that I cried real tears for the plight of others I didn't know.

And then there was Miss Altum.

Miss Altum was pretty, and she treated everyone fairly. She had high expectations for each of us. She loved her first class of sixth graders, and we knew it. She wrote a poem for us at Christmas that year, and I still remember how it ended:

"And how could I love anything more than each of you in Room 24?"

Right up to the time when I met Miss Altum, school had not played a huge part in my young life. Or maybe, it would be better said that I had learned how to efficiently neutralize the negatives at school. For a little perspective, you'd have to understand my parents. Frankly, the chances of that are minimal, but I'll do my best.

My parents taught us we could be anything we wanted to be. They taught us to think for ourselves, and to not be afraid of being different. They endowed us with a sense of adventure and expectation and taught us to walk to the beat of our own drum. Instead of watching television, we participated in school sports, played family games on Friday nights, and learned to garden and preserve the produce. We took weekly trips to the spring to get our drinking water, and to the dairy for raw milk. These experiences fell against the backdrop of religion and morality that taught us to always be obedient, which, at that point in my life, involved observing the dress code of the church we attended.

Our parents were the original home-flippers, and they were buying and selling houses before the Property Brothers were even born! We lived in lots of houses and reaped rich experiences from it. We had an outhouse instead of a bathroom at one house, we had 11 acres of meadows and woods at another, and we opened a highly successful garden shop at yet another place.

By the time I walked into Miss Altum's sixth grade class, I had already attended two other schools and was comfortable with my role of "new- kid" – the lonely girl who wore long dresses and sensible shoes, and who could never buy her lunch at school. One thing that never stopped stinging, though, was the unkind remarks of classmates who were old

enough to know better. Kid-like giggles, too-loud whispers, pointing fingers, and overt mockery, followed me everywhere I went:

“Hey, did you steal those shoes from your grandma?!”

“I like your Little House on the Prairie Dress!”

But I had already learned that if you ignore people long enough, they’ll either leave you alone or you’ll finally move away from them.

In previous years of school, I was the “teacher’s pet” because I always had my nose in a book and never said a word to anyone. I was a good reader, I got my homework in on time, and my answers were right.

But, while I enjoyed the privilege of position with my teachers, that position only made things harder with my classmates. That’s when I learned that books were kinder than people. Cherry Ames and the Hardy Boys never failed to welcome me on their adventures, and Nancy Drew didn’t care how long my skirts were. Once again, my books had taught me well. So, when the mean kids came around, I closed them up like a bad book and opened another one I liked better.

By the time I walked into Miss Altum’s 6th grade class, I was pretty sure I didn’t need anything except books. They were the only friends I had, and I was okay with it.

To this day, I’m not sure what Miss Altum saw in me, but there was something. I don’t know why she took the time to try to connect with me, but she did. I can’t think why she cared about this one little sixth-grade girl in the long dress, sitting alone at lunch in homemade clothing, but somehow, she did.

Miss Altum was the first teacher who ever assigned a book report to me, and I was immediately in love. I was in love with the idea of combining my two favorite things, reading and creative writing, into one project that was not only graded, but required!

And, with every book report, every smile, every affirmation, my teacher was dusting off the windows to my soul, gently, methodically, until the light inside me began to shine through where the grime had been.

Miss Altum didn't see the long dresses, or the home-packed lunches, or the quiet withdrawn little girl who made straight A's. No, Miss Altum saw *me*. The real me. And she found a way to join in my world and connect with me.

When I wrote a pages-long book report for my teacher, she responded with a paragraphs-long answer. Every time. She wrote things like, "Your report makes me want to read this book," and "You have a way of making this book come to life." Soon enough, I was writing books reports for "extra credit" I didn't need, but my heart secretly swelled with pride and accomplishment each time I received a report back with a handwritten note from my teacher.

Miss Altum didn't just encourage me to read. She persistently presented me with opportunities to exhibit leadership, and places to use my voice to express myself. For instance, she recommended me to be the student ambassador for 6th grade parents who were visiting the school. I was excused from classwork for two days, I received a badge that designated me as an ambassador, and I was trusted to accomplish a specific and important task.

My teacher gently encouraged me to participate in track and field activities at the end of the school year, and allowed a certain amount of latitude during class when I made a new friend and dared to whisper in the back of the room or send a note to her.

Miss Altum. At the time I had no idea this was her first classroom. I had no idea she was giving me space to grow. I had no idea she was pulling me out of my shell. What I did know is that I loved my teacher, and she loved me. I knew I enjoyed stepping outside myself. I knew I felt safe with her. I knew she believed in me.

My sixth-grade year was pure magic. Was the magic in Miss Altum's handwritten notes to me? Or was it in her willingness to show she believed in me? Without her encouragement, I would still have been an avid reader, but would I ever have gone on to write? Maybe not.

Miss Altum. A young, inexperienced teacher, wise enough to know how and where to apply the most valuable tool in her toolbox – love.

Miss Altum, thank you for showing me how to cultivate an active mind. Thank you for believing in me. Thank you for teaching me to love writing. The magic was inside you, running over and spilling out, a gift of immeasurable value.

And for that, I remain ever your thankful student.

Dory Skinner