

## An expression of love

The old man entered his modest, three bedroom home, brushed the snow from his heavy wool coat and hung it on one of several hooks lined to the left of the door. He shook his frosted cap and placed it beside his coat. Many years ago, it would have been a challenge to find room to place anything amongst the jumble of outerwear hanging here, there and everywhere. He often would have had to avoid tripping on the winter boots scattered about the narrow entryway. No longer, though. His articles of clothing, hung carefully, were all that informed the observer that someone was home.

He shivered as he lugged his bag of groceries to the kitchen. He lit the gas stove, not to prepare dinner (that would begin soon) but to warm up; the temperature outside had dipped to minus 15c and his 1940s era bungalow, never renovated, gave up its fight against the harshest of the elements long ago. They had always planned to update the home once the kids had moved out – God knows it needed help, especially the kitchen, his sanctuary – but soon after that his wife became ill and died less than a year later. Now, alone for so long, he had lost the will and the desire to do much of anything, other than to cook.

The evening meal was always an essential part of his world, and he treated its preparation with all of the tenderness and passion that he found so difficult to express in more traditional ways. Though a bookkeeper for most of his life, his true vocational calling, unfulfilled, was cooking. Every night, since the day he married, he prepared dinner for his wife, and later, for his two children. Over time, the process became highly ritualized: unfailingly, he would stop by the local grocer each weekday after work and after his yard chores on weekends, picking up his fresh meat and vegetables, and on Saturdays, a pie for dessert. Once home, he would lay out the ingredients and begin to chop, julienne and trim. Soon the home would come alive with smells of garlic and onion and aromatic herbs. Mouths would water and invariably one or both of the children would call out “when’s dinner ready?” Once seated, his family would experience the fullest expression of his love for the food, and for them. His feelings, so difficult to express in words, were shared and understood by all in his delicious creations at the end of each day.

But that was long ago. He had been alone now for nearly twenty years. For a few weeks after his wife had passed away, concerned friends and neighbours came around to check on him to bring him food. He was sincerely thankful for their kindness, but he never could find the words to express himself, so the awkward silences eventually gave way to just silence when people stopped coming by. He continued to shop daily for his evening meal, but, cooking for one, the joy that the nightly ritual had always given him was all but extinguished.

His son, the elder of the two children, had married and lived on the west coast. His job and three children made it quite impossible to make the trip across the country to visit. Instead, semi-regular e-mails with family pictures filled the old man’s inbox. A Christmas card, arriving just last week, complete with family portrait, sat on the mantle above the fireplace. There was no card from his daughter, who, rebellious and troubled, left home immediately after college and disappeared into the

ether. His wife mourned her child’s abrupt departure, a girl who seemed determined from an early age to get as far away as possible from their sleepy town as possible and never come back. He suffered her loss stoically, but never once harboured ill feelings for his daughter’s decision. She was entitled to live her life on her own terms, and he never strayed from that belief.

After many years of dining alone, earlier this year on a crisp, autumn day and after a long walk (long walks often filled his days after he retired), the old man stopped in at the local grocer and purchased a large quantity of meat and vegetables, far more than had become customary. The butcher, who had served the venerable patron for longer than he could remember, asked if he had company coming over that night. He smiled, shook his head, thanked him, and headed home. That evening, possessed with energy and purpose that he had not felt in a very long time, he began to chop, julienne and trim. While the meta was in the oven, he turned on the radio to a station that didn’t play music but instead provided a steady stream of conversation. For the first time in ages, the sound of people chattering about this and that filled the kitchen and dining room. He set the table – for four – poured himself a glass of wine (a rare indulgence indeed) and proceeded to set down four plates of roast beef, root vegetables and mashed potatoes. He sat down, sipped his wine, and ate quietly, listening to the snippets of conversation floating about the room. After dinner was over and he had removed the three plates of uneaten food, he wondered if he had just done a very foolish thing, preparing a large meal for no one in particular. He thought about it, not for very long, and decided that one of his greatest joys was to express his love of life through the creation of a wonderful meal, and that he missed terribly not doing so. And so, foolish or not, every Saturday, the old man planned and executed his wonderful dinner for four, accompanied by a small glass of wine and a host of radio companions.

On this night, a Saturday night, he had just put the lamb into the oven and turned on the radio when there was a knock on the door. Shaken from his routine, he walked past the living room fireplace and opened the door. Looking older, very weary, but unmistakably his daughter, she wordlessly walked in, followed by two children, a boy and a girl, whom he estimated were in their early teens. They all looked as if they hadn’t slept in days. His daughter, very much like her father, was economical with words: she looked up at him, and after a moment asked “Is dinner ready?” Almost, he assured her. As they set down their bags and settled onto the couch, he quietly retired to the back of the house, pulling out extra blankets and laying them on beds that had not been slept on in many years. He came back into the kitchen and tended to his dinner for four. His daughter wandered in, drawn by the delicious aromas. After a long while, he broke the silence. “Will you stay the night?” “I don’t know”, she replied in a whisper. “Please stay”, he whispered back. “Okay”.

“There’s pie for dessert”.

*David*

### Aurora

15165 Yonge Street, Suite 201, L4G 1M1  
Tel: (905) 713-3765 Fax: (905) 713-2937

### Toronto

10 Heathfield Drive, M1M 3A7  
Tel: (416) 286-2534 Fax: (416) 286-5097

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# possibilities unleash your imagination

## Let it snow

Many people would argue that one of the downsides of living in Southern Ontario is the fact that we get winter. Cold weather, ice, snow. Ugh. The fact is; I like winter. Or more accurately, I like snow.

It’s probably in part due to the fact that I was born in February. In fact, the biggest snowfall for the year came in the days leading up to the day I was born. No doubt, my first glimpse of the outside world suggested that it was white.

To some, winter paralyzes. They hibernate in warm homes awaiting the arrival of spring. Others head off with the birds to warmer climates where snow shovels and parkas don’t exist. I like shoveling snow, and wearing a parka and snow boots, is in my opinion, one of the joys of living in Canada.

The argument is always made to me that as I get older, I will change my tune about winter. I will seek refuge like everyone else. Admittedly, I do far less in the winter than I once did. I haven’t been on a snowmobile for a long time. The last snowman I made would have been when the kids were young. And the hockey skates see very little action these days.



No doubt I shouldn’t be shoveling snow either, and in fact, we have a service that keeps it pretty clear. But when a small skiff of snow finds itself on the driveway and walkway – too little for the plow, but more than enough to track into the house – I grab an old heavy winter coat, put on a warm hat and mitts and venture out for a rendezvous with winter. And I always feel better for it. Younger in fact, as it takes me back to days of my youth.

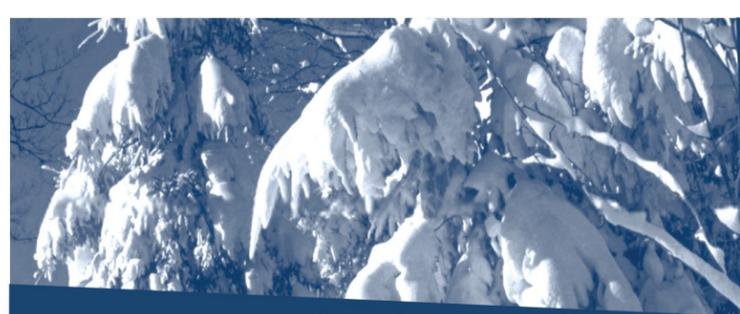
### Partners

David Frank, B.A.

### Continued on page 2

Laurie Sobie, B.A., CLU

Bill Bell, B.Math, B.Ed, RHU, CFP



# possibilities

unleash your imagination

## Let it snow cont'd

But much more than the opportunities for physical activity that suddenly arrives with a snow-covered landscape, I enjoy the tranquility that comes with a blanket of white. There is a quiet and solitude that exists on a cold winter's night that you can never find during the rest of the year. I love to just stand at the end of the partially cleared driveway and listen to the sounds of winter. Or rather, the noticeable lack of sound. The snow creates a sound baffle, and the winter weather chases people into their homes. It's quiet, peaceful, and spiritual.

This may of course be a simple case of connecting snow with Christmas. Certainly to me, Christmas needs to be white. I've reached the age where stories of the snow at Christmas "when I was young" have reached the status of tall tales. You know, "snow above the eavestroughs" and that sort of thing. But that's how I remember it. Of course in more recent years, it appears that we are running about 50% in terms of white vs. green Christmas (and I have the advantage of living well north of the city where snow is more likely to stick around). But yes, each year I hope that Bing Crosby's dream comes true. And I'm thankful when it does.

As I write this we have just returned from Dallas, Texas where, much to our surprise the temperature was near freezing. But no snow. On our return however we discovered that we had missed the first real snowfall of the winter for southern Ontario, and our neighbourhood was covered in a fresh coat of soft white powdery snow. I was elated.

The plow had cleared our driveway so no work remained for me, but I did take a moment to stand alone in the cold white winter that had suddenly enveloped my world. I stood staring at the few stars that brightened the sky, and I started thinking. In my mind I heard the words (probably in Charlie Brown's voice) "Peace on earth, goodwill towards men."

I doubt that I really understand

the full meaning and importance of that statement. I mean, I have never experienced war in any direct way. Peace is the only thing I actually know. Yes, I am aware that war and strife is a constant on our planet. And I realize how very fortunate I am to have lived in a time and place where peace and prosperity is the norm. Still, in the hustle and bustle of our daily lives we often feel stress and pressure that disconnects us from others and makes us feel that somehow the world is a competitive, unfriendly and perhaps dangerous place. Despite the fact that we are in constant contact with people every day, we feel isolated and alone. Peaceful is not how most people would describe their daily lives, and goodwill is not what we direct at the driver who cuts us off in traffic.

But standing in the cold quiet calm of a winter's night I felt connected and at peace. I thought of my family, each of them in their respective homes; safe, warm, happy. Unfettered by thoughts of work or tasks that need to be done or Christmas presents that need to be purchased, I let my mind focus on what each of them might be doing right now. And I smiled as I thought of how rich my life has become by having so many people to share it with.

Looking down the quiet street I noticed that a warm light glowed from the windows of every house. And each house no doubt contained members of another family. Collectively, we are members of the global family. We are all the same, I thought.

All this thinking, just because of a little snow.

So to you, your family and those you love I wish you joy and happiness at this time of year. And may you find a quiet place in your heart to realize the dream of the season – Peace on Earth, and Goodwill to all.

And snow.

Bill



## Jingle all the way to the cottage

It's easy sometimes to get overwhelmed by the approaching winter season. Not only is the weather likely to make our lives a little more challenging, but there is often a lot of stress (and expense!) surrounding the holidays and especially Christmas. Shopping, parties and family get-togethers quickly eat away at the little spare time we would otherwise have, making what is often the most joyful time of year the most hectic and stressful time as well. Not to mention the extra calories we all consume...

My solution to all the madness, as ever, is a trip to the cottage. Every year myself and a few friends venture up North for some forced R & R before the holidays. What was once an excuse to play a little shinny on the lake before heading home from University has since turned into an annual tradition. If you find that the holidays often provide more stress than relief from it, I would encourage you to give this a try. It will likely force you to get your shopping done a little earlier, and you may have to miss a pre-Christmas party or two, but relaxing at the cottage with the knowledge that you are all ready for the holidays is too perfect for words to adequately describe.



If you are anything like me then you die a little inside if forced into last minute shopping at a busy shopping centre or outlet mall just before Christmas. Over salted parking lots and the overwhelming smell of exhaust that lead inside to the promise of Christmas deals you know will be replaced by better ones in a week's time on

Once or twice a year, I fall victim to a miserable cold. And seemingly within minutes of my first sneeze or cough, my father is at my doorstep with a large potful of steaming hot chicken soup. "From your mother", he says, as if it needs saying. Just breathing in the aromas as I ladle the golden mixture into my bowl signals the beginning of the end of my illness. Every mouthful fills me with warmth throughout and a palpable sense that everything will be alright.

A good book can often work in much the same way when the head and the heart are in need of a little tender loving care or simply a pleasant diversion from a dreary day. And there are few that can do the trick better than Chicken Soup for the Soul. The short stories contained within the many books in the series (almost 200, at last count) can warm our insides and bring a smile of recognition or reminiscence, or perhaps a tear or two that need to be shed. In short, a good story is *always* just

Boxing Day is not my idea of a good time. Unless you leave the house in shorts and a T then you'll no doubt overheat to the point of dehydration walking around in your winter garb, forced to settle on gifts you are less than elated about. And you'll no doubt be inundated by such enchanting Christmas classics as *Christmas with the Chipmunks* or worse. Not only does heading to the cottage allow you to avoid this nightmare, but the cottages I am familiar with go through a magical transformation in the winter as well. Guests are whittled down to a manageable number as summertime fair weather fans stay warm in the cities. The pace of life seems to slow down to a much more natural state of calm. The sometimes chaotic bustle on the water is replaced by small shovelled off pockets of would be NHLers and future Olympic figure skaters. There is a certain added charm to a cottage in the winter that's indescribable. There are no bugs, no sunburns, no poison ivy, and no critters to worry about. And the screened in porch instantly becomes an enormous beer fridge. What could be better? I think everyone should force themselves to take a little break around the holidays if they can. You are sure to enjoy the calm and peacefulness of wintertime as it was truly meant to be experienced.

I wish you all a safe, healthy, and happy holiday season. I'll keep the cider warm in case you happen by the cottage, so feel free to stop in for a mug by the fire!

Cheers, Nick

## Chicken Soup for the Soul

what the doctor ordered.

The latest book in the series, Chicken Soup for the Soul: O' Canada, the Wonders of Winter, throws another log on the fire on a frosty evening. And we are especially proud to announce that our founding partner, Bill Bell, has not one but two of his stories published for all to enjoy. His observations of children playing road hockey ("A Canadian Scrapbook Moment") resonated strongly with me, sending me back to those carefree days when only the lack of light and an empty belly would get us to abandon the game for another day.

We at Bell Financial congratulate Bill and all of the other authors who have created a collection of stories that will help to take the chill out of the long winter months.

David

