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March 2010



Voices from your Valley

Merri's Diary	3
Devon's Poetry	4
Shirley Neddenriep	5
Marilyn Woerth	6
Frieda Burston	6
Hunting & Fishing Report	9
"The Face of Drought"	10
Vicki O'Neal	11
Coupon for Valentino's!	12

Voices from the Valley of the Nemaha

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Thank You

Your Country Neighbor

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Your Country Neighbor

Diary of a Part-time Housewife

Merri Johnson

We all have our idiosyncrasies, those irrational mindsets that impact every aspect of our lives, including the decisions we make, like saving one seldom-used item, but tossing out or giving away another of equal potential worth.

Case in point: coffee pots and grinders. You may recall previous columns in which I mentioned my husband's indulgence in fresh coffee beans. I don't recall exactly when his taste in coffee crossed the line from satisfaction with ordinary ground coffee to obsession with the particular bean and grind and method of brewing. At this point, the genesis of his craving is irrelevant. The bottom line is that whole beans need to be ground; ergo a coffee grinder is required.

We started out with a simple electric grinder. It worked fine, but as I recall, the cord had to be wrapped around the unit for storage. My husband, being in the camp of "stuffers" rather than "winders," would most often just wad the cord up and stuff it behind the grinder in the corner of the cabinet. I suppose there's no real harm in that, but it was annoying just the same.

If memory serves, he was experimenting with various brewing methods in the early days of his now firmly established addiction. There was the electric percolator, the Pyrex stove-top percolator, the boiling-water press, and the double-decker, drip-style earthen-ware pot. The electric percolator bit the dust, but we still have the other three, plus a camp-fire pot. You never know.

At any rate, the brewing process advanced to the high-tech realm when I gave my husband a fully automatic electric machine with a built-in grinder, timer, carafe and warming plate for his birthday. Of course that meant that the separate grinder just sat in the cabinet taking up space. So I offered it to some friends who were tempted to try whole beans, too. (I think they've since moved on to the single-serve packet brew machines. No muss, no fuss, no grinder.)

Somehow, even though we didn't need it, we acquired another small grinder. It may have been a Christmas grab-bag gift. Anyway, it went into the cabinet where its predecessor had been and was pretty much forgotten about.

The whole-bean coffee craze, meanwhile, continued unabated. We received an offer too good to refuse from one of the gourmet bean marketers: try our "coffee-of-the-month" subscription and we'll send you an automatic coffee machine for free! My husband was all for it, though I felt a little guilty, knowing that we would never purchase enough \$15 a pound coffee to justify the company's gift of the coffee maker. But, we accepted the offer, the coffee maker arrived, and I prudently put it in storage for the day when we would need to replace our current machine.

The quality of today's electric gadgets being what it is that day was only a couple years off. But we were not dismayed; I just brought out the spare machine and we were back in business, except that the new machine lacked a built-in grinder.

Naturally, we forgot that we had a grinder already in the back of the cabinet, so we bought a new and improved model with hidden, wind-up cord storage. This cord wouldn't get tangled up among the other items in the cabinet, plus we now had a spare grinder.

Until my sister came for a visit. She complimented my husband's coffee and mentioned that she really missed using fresh ground beans herself since her grinder had broken. Not to worry, I told her, we have a spare just taking up space. I sent the grinder with the unruly cord home with her.

Wouldn't you know, the other day, our one-and-only grinder seized up. My husband managed to get the blade mechanism loosened up with pliers, but the next day it seized again. Caput. He went to every likely retailer in town looking for one. No one stocks them. (Retailers, take note.) He was so distraught at the prospect of having to drink ordinary coffee that he nearly made a special trip to Nebraska City to buy a grinder. I reminded him that we were going to St. Joe the next Sunday and could buy one there. Couldn't he survive that long without his special coffee?

I must point out here that my husband only makes coffee at home on his days off, so he really only needed to tough it out for a couple of mornings. Even so, it was touch and go for him for the next day or so, just contemplating the weekend without his special brew. Then it occurred to him to grind the beans in the blender. It chopped them up all right, but it was a poor substitute for a grinder. Even I could taste the difference.

I was relating this tale of woe to my daughter in Georgia. Being a bit of a coffee-holic herself, she sympathized with her dad, and then commented that she, too, had been the recipient of a grinder from our once inexhaustible supply of extra coffee grinders. What? We – or more precisely, I – had given away *three* coffee grinders? Apparently so.

Oh, well. We may be short on coffee grinders, but we have *plenty* of pots. Maybe I should consider giving one or two away.....

Poetry by Devon Adams

PRAIRIE WINDOWS

DEFINITION

Light snow sifts slowly,
spiraling downward,
like powdered sugar
shaken on gingerbread.
All the paths that hooves
and paws have worn
into the grass are defined,
leaving a map of white lines
that wander and cross each other,
exposing patterns like xray
images glowing on a screen.

LIVING IN TOWN

They worked hard for years and years,
farming family land with love and devotion.
But bodies age and joints wear out,
and minds wear out sometimes, and
then its time to move to town and rest.
Except that they don't know how to
slow down and enjoy "free time."
They miss the privacy and beauty
of the country spaces that are
blocked by all the other houses
on the crowded city block. They
are geared for action and work,
and they can't keep busy in a tiny
house with a postage stamp yard.
So, sometimes one, or both, of them
will sit and stare and grieve for
what has been and is forever gone.
But if they're lucky, they'll discover
other options, and brand new paths
to take that lead them softly into
the last of their tomorrows.

The square house was tall,
with a full second story,
plus an attic with eyes.
It sat on the prairie
like a rock, facing all
four winds with courage.
The fields were close, with
only a barbed wire fence
between the corn and the yard,
and the barn and the sheds
were near enough for winter chores.
It was an empty house,
on that winter afternoon.
The hollow sound of the
cold rooms shivered, and the
air smelled of old plaster and
dust, but the large, high windows
drew the light of the prairie inside,
as the sun sank in a cold
magenta ball of fire, and
the sky grew bands of pink
and blue that touched
the edge of the horizon.

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TAKING TURNS, OR NOT

Hunger dictates manners, sometimes,
and blue jays don't have any, even
on a good day, so they are
in the middle of the bird feeder
convention, screeching and flapping
their gorgeous blues at all the others,
gobbling like redneck good old boys,
stuffing their sharp faces with the
most choice morsels, being bullies
of the first degree. If they were
human, they'd be labeled sociopaths,
as they appear to lack any semblance
of compassion or the faintest trace
of empathy, being instead staunch
defenders of selfish, self-serving
behaviors that keep them fat and
healthy, immune to any cooperative
attitude of a democratic community.
Now and then, however, their scores
are settled by a patient cat, who thinks
that even dictators taste good.

THE WEIGHT OF GOLD

The moon was full of gold,
heavy, barely reaching over the horizon,
straining for a grip on the dusky sky,
trying to pull itself from the other side
into the infinite vault of heaven.

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WINTER DRIVING - 2005 - Some Things Never Change -

Shirley Neddenriep

The weatherman predicted snow that Tuesday. But not until late afternoon. Clouds blocked any view of the sun but the clear and dry highway beckoned traffic. Driving on snowy or iced over roads is something to be avoided, but what could happen? I would be back home by the time the snow arrived.

Our little office jangled with phone calls, the door swung constantly and with each visitor a draft of cold air. I thought about plugging in the little space heater near my feet but I would have to get down on my hands and knees and crawl under the desk to plug it into a power strip.

Really I wanted to leave work early to attend a meeting to be held that day and thought that for the few hours in the office I could tough it out without the heater. I greeted visitors and engaged them in conversation. One visitor waited and we discussed an upcoming event. "See, it is the day after Valentine's Day!" I showed him the calendar with a red heart superimposed on 14. "Oh, I am glad you reminded me!" It is the day no man dares to forget! So my thoughts were diverted for a bit from the prospects of driving home in a storm.

About 11 am I called a friend to ask about the meeting. "Why," she said, "I just got word that the meeting is cancelled. "Why?" I asked. "The weather! It's has been snowing here for about an hour!" She'd called from 10 miles away, the direction I'd have to travel to get home.

About noon the snow began falling at my location. The snow that was not scheduled until late afternoon! Dread filled me at the thought of driving on snowy roads.

I watched out the window ever so often and felt relieved to see the snow melt as it fell on the tarmac surrounding the buildings. It turned into water, messy but not difficult. I stayed busy, placed an order for office supplies, responded to e-mails, took messages, all the while nervous as a cat.

The snow continued steadily and after an hour no longer melted but began to build up into a foreboding layer of white. No longer any comfort out there. No melting as it fell. Time crawled.

One thing about the 2 pm end of my six-hour day is that very few others leave work at the hour. My boss could read my mind and expressed concern. "You might as well head out!" What welcome words to hear as I stumbled against a desk. Trying to be relaxed about the 'long' commute home, I replied, "Well, maybe I will do that."

"Be careful," came the warning as I snapped my long coat around me and left for the day. In the parking lot the little white car sat hunched under piles of snow. The car had still been warm when the snow began, thus rims of ice had frozen into place around windows. The long brush/scrapper, I remembered, was home in a closet.

I slung at the snow with a long red scarf to make part of it go away. I started the car then and sat awhile to let it warm up and melt the ice, but the cold air seeped into my space, my gloved hands. Parking lots are serious places. I crept along to the access road. I'm such a chicken!

I flexed my fingers to keep them from freezing into the shape of C-clamps. Finally at the highway things began to warm up. Then the fogged-up windows. Then the rear de-icer, working, three times I reset it.

I made the 20-minute drive home in 45 minutes. Safe in my own garage and warmed through, I inspected the car, digging snow and ice from the wipers and wheel wells. Inspecting the tire treads I noticed little rocks imbedded and had to get a dull kitchen table knife to dig them out. The tires had saved the day; they deserved a clean up.

I spoke to a son about the rocks. He advised, "Let it go. You will never be able to get ahead of that." He continued with three methods to release the tires of the pea gravel, all suggestions involved hot tires while driving. I dismissed his suggestions as life-threatening maneuvers beyond my driving skills. Anyway, the farmer came in for supper about that time.

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Where Life is Good

Marilyn Woerth

Just a couple of months ago as my husband and I were driving to his company's Christmas party he turned to me and said "I just love all this", (now all this meant the cold, the snow, the layers of clothing) staring straight ahead I just said "Don't tell anyone."

The rewards for this long, snowy, cold winter will be an ample supply of those beautiful sunny-faced Spring bulbs. What power is packed into those tiny buried treasures! It is always amazing to me that the harder the winter the more vibrant and healthy these bulbs produce. Just think how fortunate we are up here in zone 5 (gardener's term for what can grow in our climate). They can't grow these little gems down south.

Unfortunately, the vice-versa occurs. This fall the garden club I belong to took a trip down to one of our favorite nurseries. It didn't take long before there were five gawking women standing around a beautiful blooming three foot shrub. As we slowly closed our gaping mouths a sigh was expressed by all. Having done our homework we knew this precious, envied plant known as a crepe myrtle couldn't possibly grow in our zone 5, we knew that it was recommended for zone 7, but the optimist in us held us captivated. "Well" says one, "the tag says zone 5". Another member replied, "Does anybody know anyone that has tried one." There was only silence.

So we called one of the staff over, she explained that it would need protection during the winter and probably would die back, then come back up from the roots much like a butterfly bush. Now I have always been up to a challenge and often have pushed the envelope but a crepe myrtle, a shiver ran down my spine. Taking a deep breath I slowly inserted, "well I suppose I could be the club's guinea pig". So after shell-ing out thirty-five dollars I took my large pot home with a promise to the club members that I would keep them apprised on the progress of my new purchase.

Now I am not a fussy gardener, the rule in my garden is you have to be tough or be gone. I have taken a lot of praise for my gardens (three acres worth) but the true praise belongs to the plants. Some meet my strict code of survival and those that don't, well let's just say that they don't make the call back list. As for the crepe myrtle, I put a large mound of shredded leaves at its base and will hope for the best. Will I be devastated if it doesn't make it through this really tough winter? Probably not, after all, I have many spring surprises awaiting me here where life can be tough but good.



Hillside near Brownville

Sometimes Life is not so Good

by Frieda Burston

They can have all the street demonstrations they want to in Copenhagen, they can have all the poor nations of the world demanding that the rich nations of the world pay the bill for everybody, they can talk about World Warming all they want to. I don't care. I'm mad about the whole thing.

Fit-to-be-tied mad. Spittin'-nails mad. Puffed-up-cat-fur mad. If they want to look at my yard and still say, "The world is warming". Let them try it. Their tongues will freeze to their lying teeth.

I have been here a few weeks more than a year. I spent a few weeks settling down in the cheerful little house. I spent all the rest of the time on the yard: hauling out the dilapidated dog houses, tearing the ratty old carpeting off the patio, tearing out the bamboo first with pickaxes, then later with a small tractor, leveling, planting grass in the empty spaces, putting in shrubs and borders and flowers, starting a plantation of grapes and berries, sitting in a lawn chair watching the yard grow.

Mush, just grey mush. All my beautiful garden, turned to mush. Overnight. But the neighbor's bamboo is pushing through the fence, ready to come back, waving in my face. *Growl, growl, growl.*

It wasn't the snow that did it, although everyone had told me that while Sacramento had a summer of over 100's, the autumns here were colorful but warm. My first winter here, last winter, was just an extended autumn. I had to buy a padded jacket, but I never zipped it. So I was totally not ready to come out in the morning and find a white icing in every green leaf. Every blade of grass, every leaf, every flower had changed color overnight, had turned a glassy glossy sharply shining white. And under the glistening ice you could see the green darkening as the bad news sank down to the roots.

I didn't go in and slash my wrists.

The week before we had an announcement of worse to come. It had hailed.

I have seen hail before, in Missouri and in Texas. But I had never seen it before like this— as if I were inside one of those cute little paper weights that you turn upside down and the white stuff flies out and falls like snow. Can you imagine white balls the size of mothballs (do they still have mothballs?) falling all over, closing in your world to about 100 feet around? I had to look at my feet to be sure that some cataclysm hadn't turned me upside down, that I was still big me in Sacramento.

And it lingered. When the hail stopped falling, it just stayed there, like snow. So the real snow, when it came, just finished the disaster. And it was only the first week of December. Three more months to sit and look at what had begun to be a beautiful little yard. Sorrow, sorrow.....

Holed up in the house, I find TV too stressful to watch for long. Radio at mealtimes is enough. I thought all the scary stuff I was getting on email was because my friends liked to scare themselves— but listening to radio I find the polls mirror their concerns. Oddly, it cheers me up— I find a return to some of the old values. Tiger Woods' infidelities brought a tremendous outcry— not out of sympathy for a wronged wife, but out of concern for his children. Osama's bowing to the King of Arabia brought a flashback to the majesty of democracy. Sarah Plain's facing the public on the subject of her out-of-wedlock grandson brought a surge of sympathy from other religious parents who had been similarly surprised. National sentiment rallied around our military after the Fort Hood killings.

The snow, the hail, the cold will go. The basics of America remain. We will bloom again. —frieda

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Whisler's Hunting & Fishing Report



by Josh Whisler
(Photo provided by Author)

Fishing:

The Missouri River is low but still has the level fluctuating with the on again/off again snow melting. Ice flows are not as common as past months and it's funny because the temps are still sub-zero at times, not to mention the wind chill is still hanging in there. Area ponds are getting enough ice to panfish and even with the amount of melting going on, the ice thickness reports are in excess of 14 inches. Fishermen that challenge the elements are having success. Perch, Crappie, and Bluegill are what most are harvesting with some pulling in Channel Cats and Large Mouth Bass. What are they biting on, you ask? Minnows for the most action and success, but wax worms and meal worms have their days. They seem to be biting in the morning, the earlier the better, and again seem to have a good run mid afternoon around 3:00. But it has been changing a little with the overcast days, and the sun is staying around longer as the days get longer – it's not dark at 6:00 AM or PM anymore. Baits are still available in the local bait shops so give it a try — fresh fish is not too bad this time of year.

Hunting:

Hunting seasons have all but closed up for this season but rabbit that remains open till February 28th. The large snow amounts this last winter has gotten even state legislators talking about the number of deer that are

still around after the smoke cleared. It is nothing to see a herd of 50 deer standing in the distance, silhouetted against horizon at sunset. Then you drive a couple more miles and see another herd. There is definitely a problem and plenty of folks know about it – we'll have to wait & see what shakes out of The Game and Parks Meetings this year to remedy this issue.

Spring Turkey Permits are available now! Starting the second Monday of January - permits are available to buy. This year each hunter may not have more than three (3) spring turkeys. Permits are for One (1) Male Bird or bearded hen. And the Spring Turkey Permit is now statewide.

NEW for 2010:

Youth permits (resident or non-resident) are \$5.00.

Restrictions on draw weight of archery equipment has been lifted (no bow draw weight).

Spring Turkey Seasons:

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Archery ———March 25th – May 31st

Shotgun———April 17th – May 31st

Winter will end soon enough and now is the time to get ready for those spring activities. Restraining that fishing pole or polish up that turkey shotgun because soon enough it will be here and all you'll have to do is enjoy it. You can never be too ready. Remember I'm not an expert but I have my share of luck. I wonder if the experts are having any luck today? So until next time "Happy Hunting & Fishing."

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March 2010

Your Country Neighbor



Fellow Ice Fishermen at Burchard Lake braving the elements on Valentine's Day 2010. What was I doing there? My wife was with me – she's not just my valentine, she's my fish partner too.

The Face of Drought

by Karen Ott



My message looks a bit different this week. Instead of spending my Thursday evening typing a homey farm-life missive, Dale and I were attending a North Platte Natural Resources District public hearing related to "Proposed changes to the district's current groundwater allocation rules and accompanying definitions." Even in the dead of winter, talk of irrigation water takes precedent over all things.

It had snowed all day, and was still snowing when we left our darkened yard for the NRD offices east of Scottsbluff. The hi-ways were coated in a treacherously deceiving hazard known locally as black-ice, and as we crossed the Platte River Bridge we spoke of the woman who had, just that morning, slid down a steep embankment on the southern approach and smashed into a river-bottom cottonwood. The law enforcement, and rescue vehicles with their flashing red lights, were gone; the crumpled car towed to a body shop, and the injured woman resting in a local hospital, but the poignant picture of men urgently working in the snow to reach the unfortunate victim will stay with me for a long, long time.

In the half hour or so it took to get to the meeting Dale and I chit-chatted; he talked of frozen cattle tanks, the skunk living under the 'red shed', and the price of corn. I griped about the tire shop's worn out office chairs and warned him he should pay more attention to where he was going....or we would end up in the ditch. To which he countered, "I can see where I'm driving,"

We passed the Scottsbluff sugar factory, the tall 'smokestacks' wreathed in warm steam, its many windows spilling white light into the snowy night. During the next few weeks the 2009-2010 campaign will be winding down and the factory will be put to bed....until next October's beet harvest. Although we didn't speak I knew what each of us was thinking; without sufficient groundwater how many more beet harvests would we see?

Despite hazardous traveling conditions the NRD conference room was filled with anxious farmers; some with wives in tow, some alone. The hour-long question and answer period preceding the hearing was what I expected....anger and disbelief tinged with a nagging fear that no matter how much our groundwater allocation is reduced it will never be enough...that in the not so distant future our wells will be shut down permanently, our way of life unrecognizably, and irrevocably, reshaped by forces beyond our control.

The audience listened, vented, and offered suggestions, some valid and to the point... others less so, but each born from a deep-seated desire to keep the land productive and profitable...and their home communities strong.

The public hearing portion of the meeting began at eight. Some attendees, like me, had previously signed in to offer comment; others made a spur of the moment decision and

spoke extemporaneously, baring their troubled hearts to the NRD board.

Following adjournment there was the usual back and forth banter as men and women visited about the proceedings, but it was still snowing, and the roads were slick, so before long there was a line of pickups headed down the long gentle hill, which in simple times, hosted the local soap box derby.

Snow is still falling this morning; the stark outline of the river bottom trees softened by a velvety veil.....the world looks calm and untroubled. The life-giving streams of underground water will drink in the moisture falling from the skies, but it doesn't belong to us anymore.....someone else owns our snow.
Karen

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Lost Coast

It was an ordinary Saturday.

Michael and I were walking down a Redwood trail in NorCal. I'm not sure why I felt so uneasy. Maybe it was because of the crash of a big branch somewhere in the woods. Maybe it was because everything was slick and soggy and muffled. A recent storm had left a lot of raindrops clinging to the branches above us.

"How often do redwoods lose their branches?" I asked my husband.

Michael shrugged. "Not very often," he said. "Don't worry, Chicken-Little. The sky's not going to fall."

I was silent. My husband was no help at all. I glanced at my watch. 4:03. Soon it would be growing dark in the Land-of-the-Giants.

We walked on down the trail, around the loop and then back again. My footsteps quickened. I was hurrying now.

4:26 pm.

Shadows deepened. Dusk was settling into the Redwoods. The sky above the tree-tops was still clear blue...but down here it was twilight...

My thoughts stalled and my feet slowed. It had started to rain. Abruptly. Out of a clear blue sky came the thick splattering of raindrops. Dead twigs and redwood needles started raining down on us. So strange. There was no wind, yet everything was whirling and trembling and raining—

"Michael! What's happening?"

We both came to a stop. Michael didn't speak. His silence was as frightening as the abrupt rainfall. Why did he just stand there staring? It's like he knew—

Suddenly, our world began to tilt. We felt the ground heave up under our feet, as if we were riding the crest of a wave.

"Quake!" Mike said, grabbing for my hand. "Earthquake!"

The towering trees shuddered, trembling in the twilight. They rained more water droplets and needles down on us. We could hear the creak of wood and the snap of twigs and branches.

"We've got to get out of here!" I pulled my hand away from my husband and began to run.

At 4:27 in the Afternoon

By Vicki O'Neal

"Run! Michael...Run!"

My feet pounded the trail, but I couldn't escape the urgency of Mike's words.

"Stop running!" he shouted after me. "It's the most dangerous thing you could do!"

"What?...Why?" I panted. My feet slowed. At least he's not calling me Chicken Little any more.

"You've got to watch for falling branches!" Michael said. "You can't see them if you're running!"

I stopped and waited for him to catch up with me. The ground was still shuddering. I'd never felt such a thing before... A rolling quake! The ground swelling up and up beneath our feet...the Giants trembling and wobbling about uncertainly.

What kind of a quake did that to the Giants?!

I forced myself to think calmly...to walk slowly beside Michael, peering up at the trees—watching for broken branches. Three eternities later, we came to the edge of the woods and I rushed the final steps into the clearing.

"Dear Lord!" I said. "I never want to go through that again!"

Michael started the car and we drove quickly home. The phone was ringing as we walked inside.

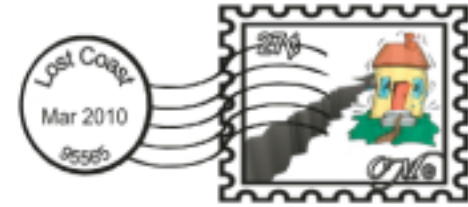
"A 6.5 on the Richter Scale," said our friend on the phone. "We've made it on CNN and all the networks."

"A 6.5!" I said. "That's the biggest quake I've ever been through!"

We turned on the news. Power outages in the city. Broken windows and water pipes. The towns of Ferndale and Eureka were chaotic. A lot of shaken people. A lot of messes and broken china. Dark houses. Scared kids.

But nobody had died or was seriously injured. We could be thankful for that! We all took a deep breath. Thank God it hadn't been worse....

Just a couple days later, Haiti suffered a devastating 7 point quake. The news circled the globe in minutes. Crushed buildings. Schools. Hospitals. Hundreds of thousands were feared dead. The quake in Haiti suddenly seemed real and personal to us in NorCal. It could've been us.



In fact, one of these days, it will be us. That's what Scientists say.

A 9 point earthquake is coming to the US. It's long overdue. America will experience what Haiti is experiencing now. Death. Chaos. Looting. Panic. The US economy could be brought to the point of no return.

It will be worse than Hurricane Katrina. Worse than 9-11. Worse than the 9 point quake/tsunami that hit Indonesia in 2004. America will suffer a major catastrophe.

I've talked to my NorCal friends about it. "Do you believe what scientists are saying?...that a 9 point quake is coming here to America?"

"Oh yes!" they said.

"So what are you doing about it?" I said. "How are you preparing?"

They looked perplexed. "Well." Shrugs. Nervous laughter. "We'll just—we'll just survive..."

"You have water and food stockpiled? Emergency supplies?"

"No. We'll worry about that later."

Later, indeed.

Ah well. The sun is shining in NorCal. The broken windows are being fixed. The cracks in the sidewalks are just an eyesore, now. No harm done, really.

It's Saturday again. An ordinary Saturday. And the memory of our 6.5 is fading fast.

We're all doing fine, folks. So, don't worry about a thing. Not a thing. And now, I'll be saying goodbye.

God's in His Heaven, and all's right with the world. And this—

Well.

This is Chicken Little signing off...

At 4:25 in the afternoon.

Vicki O'Neal
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