By Susan Siersma

After raising three children to adulthood, my husband and I were sharing more time together, and we believed that we would have "money in the bank" some day in the not too distant future.  "Won't it be great when we're retired?" became a frequent sentence in our conversations.  Then, an unforgettable year arrived and changed everything.

It was one of those years, the kind when I found my inner voice whispering, "What else can go wrong?"  My mom's health was rapidly failing and our unwed daughter had moved back in with us after delivering a baby girl.  During the previous winter, my husband's mother died a slow, cruel death from Alzheimer's disease and his father had been hospitalized following emergency surgery.  My husband's mental and physical health began deteriorating with the weight of life's troubles.  Our friends and relatives seemed to be experiencing their unfair share of hardships too.  Then September 11th happened.  Suddenly, my husband's seemingly secure job became very insecure as the economy wavered.  Life became a topsy-turvy struggle and our marriage was faltering under the strain.

Our daughter's weakened emotional condition, created by the sudden out-of-state move by her baby's father (he was to be the baby's caregiver) created the need for me to request an emergency leave of absence from my job as a special education aide.  I would care for her baby while my daughter was student-teaching - student-teaching was the only portion of her schooling left to earn the elementary education degree she needed to secure her future.  Though I had been a dedicated district employee for eleven years, the unpaid, short-term leave I requested was denied.  Unfortunately, I was caught up in the poor timing of a new superintendent and new special education supervisor; neither knew me.  They didn't realize that I had spent the last eleven years totally devoted to my special education students.  Leaving a rewarding, stable job to care for my granddaughter would be a financial burden and a difficult choice, but my heart knew it was the only *right* choice.

From the time I was a young girl, my parents had instilled in me a love of nature, of all the best, beautiful, free things that life had to offer.  Now, more than ever, I would need to draw on that love of nature; it would provide me with the strength needed to pull through the rough times.  I began to take long walks with my granddaughter and I found that I would return home physically and spiritually renewed.  Autumn was upon us; Alyssa would giggle with delight whenever I placed a leaf or a dried dandelion on the tray of her stroller.

As the trees became bare, I became aware of bird's nests that had been hidden in the dense summer foliage.  "Alyssa, look - a little bird's nest," I would say.  One of the most beautiful nests we found was a tiny, circular one created from bits of dried grasses.  The weaving was tight, strong, and yet soft to the touch.  Surely it would have rivaled one of Frank Lloyd Wright's creations.  Some were crafted from feathers, dryer lint and bits of pet fur.  Still other nests were masterpieces of corn silks, twine, strands of Easter grass and cellophane.  How resourceful those little birds were!

Each day, my eyes were drawn upward as I discovered more nests.  Some were reinforced with mud, forming super strong foundations.  Through wind, rain, thunder and lightning, they held together.  I began to think about the birds - how simple, yet how hard their lives were.  It occurred to me that no matter what obstacles were placed in their path, they managed to overcome, to survive.  And faithfully, they started each new day with a song.

Those walks helped transform an extremely difficult, desperate time in my life to a more peaceful one.  Through my observations of nature, I had faith that everything would work out and we would prevail.  Like the birds and their nests, our family had a strong foundation.  We were now living a more simple life, spending only what we needed to spend, and all the time becoming more resourceful.  Courageously, the little birds of the air huddle close during stormy times, and the current turbulence seemed to be drawing our family closer together.  And in the same way that the little birds started each day with a song, we began to listen to beautiful music more often.  A sense of tranquility was settling over our home.

Time has a way of healing, of smoothing over the bumpy parts of our lives.  Gradually we see things from a different perspective.  One afternoon, while out walking with my granddaughter, I witnessed the most exceptional message of all from the birds.  "Look at the geese, Alyssa," I said, as a flock of geese flew overhead in a perfect V formation.  For some odd reason, one goose left the group and started to fly in an entirely different direction.  The main flock completely changed its course and gradually picked up their wayward member.  As I watched this simple, beautiful display, I couldn't help but think of my family.  Our lives too, it seemed, had gone astray for a while.  But through courage, inner strength and pure love, our family would change its course and triumph.  I knew that all would be well.