

Originally published April 22, 2007

Love lingers in handprints

By SUSAN AGER
Free Press Columnist

Reader comments: "My husband passed away 20 months ago and this article touched my heart." Marge VanValkenburg of Westland

A late snow in this early spring distressed my friend more than the rest of us. She had just lost her beloved dog, a 17-year friend and, as any of us would, wanted desperately to hang onto whatever she could.

"This damn new snow!" she e-mailed me. "When I got home yesterday, it had already obliterated my sweet girl's footprints in the old snow."

Immediately I flashed back 18 years, to the sudden death of a 43-year-old reporter in our newsroom.

His wife later wrote in the Free Press about keeping his things just as they were, his sneakers by the back door, his almost-empty pack of Kool cigarettes on top of the refrigerator, his dirty shirts in the laundry basket.

She kept even his handprints on a hallway wall, left behind after reading that day's inky newspaper.

"I guarded those prints," she wrote, "sticking up Post-It notes -'Do Not Wash'- when the housekeepers came every other Tuesday. I knew I was being eccentric, but I loved imagining how Brian would laugh to see me protecting the very thing that used to evoke my wrath."

These are the heirlooms that mean the most to us when we lose someone we love. Not silver or gold or fine furniture, but the impression of a hand or a foot or a paw.

They are the best evidence that those we love lived. They are the best reminders that once they touched the Earth, and touched us.

Traces of love on a ceiling

This week, as the families of the 33 dead at Virginia Tech weep to hold their combs and toothbrushes and slippers, and to smell their clothes, I remember another woman, gone now, a lucky old woman for what her husband left her.

The living room in her rustic cottage, overlooking a lake, featured a simple plywood ceiling, erected by her sons and her husband, who died of a heart attack in middle age.

Forty years later, the ceiling still wasn't painted because alone in the dark, in flickering candlelight, she liked to look at her husband's handprints on it. He had held up the panels so many years ago while her sons nailed them tight.

If only kisses showed forever

In the same way I don't wash from my windows the tiny handprints of my 2-year-old granddaughter, who lives 800 miles away. Seeing the mark her palms left behind, I can believe she's still with me, in my house, leaning against the glass to watch birds in the yard, and I can hear her yelp with delight and I can smell her hair.

Not long after my mother died, a reader told me that she found in the pocket of her lost mother's winter coat a single white tissue on which her mother once blotted her lipstick. She told me that tissue is precious.

I wish I had such a tissue. I wish every kiss my mother ever gave me were still visible on my face, so I could look in the mirror each morning and see her love and feel her warm breath.

That happens only in fantasies. In real life, we keep what little we can.