by
Pettus Read**Read All About It**

Recently, I turned 61 years of age, and after all of the cards were read and the cake eaten, I realized that this accomplishment is not all of that big of a deal. I use the term "turned 61" lightly, because when I think of things that "turn" it is usually something that has gone bad or its freshness date has expired. Hopefully, neither of these refers to me, but the only time in our lives when we like to get older is when we are children. In fact, as children we count years by halves and as adults we

an adult say they are sixty-one and a half or seventy-two and a half. In fact, most of us age experienced individuals had rather just skip the age reporting and go right to the presents.

However, when you reach the 100 milestone you start counting by halves again and some count by even smaller fractions. They also use the term "just" a lot as well when giving the age of someone they know leaves this earth, but if you reach that century mark you have gained the right

don't even like to count them at all. I have heard lots of children say they are five and a half or ten and a half, but you will never hear

to use whatever term you want.

This year's birthday marked a time in my life when my way of looking at birthdays was somewhat different than in the prior 60 years. During those years I've looked at a birthday with enjoyment, but this year those around me expected me to just simply endure this one. This year's birthday arrived for me exactly six weeks after my wife of 35-plus years passed away due to a fast progressing battle with pancreatic cancer.

To be totally honest, her death has been the most difficult experience I have ever had to endure and to say that I was looking forward to celebrating my first birthday without her usual revelry and planning, at this time in my life, would have been a very bad misuse of the words "looking forward."

Birthdays were always very special to her and to think I had to enjoy something like a birthday without her was just hard for me to imagine.

As the day to honor me for being born arrived (which the process of me being born I had very little to do with), I found out what family is all about and that these past 35 years had been a family developing process as much as a wonderful marriage. It all started with her family, the McElroys, filling my mailbox with birthday cards of every source and size. Many of them dealt with humor about older health problems and unacceptable social habits, but it was truly something to behold.

Next, my children took over and didn't give me time to endure anything, but helped me enjoy the day with visits to my fa-

vorite restaurant and a night of enjoying my eight-month-old granddaughter. We spent an entire weekend of celebrating and remembering. Yes, there were tears, but just as many laughs and good feelings for each other filled the days.

We did just what my wife would have expected of us. Carry on and always be family in taking care of each other. I did endure the birthday, but I also enjoyed it as well. I realized what my kids and family had done for me on that special day was all put into motion over the years with the help of my wife in the way she taught them to be family. My children, friends, relatives and even hundreds of people I really don't know well have been my bridge over a very deep gorge that has appeared on the roadway of my life. This support is

what will help the journey become easier as time goes by.

Hopefully there will be even more birthdays for me, which after this experience over the last few months, I know there is no guarantee, but I'm sure they will be enjoyable and full of memories. I saw a church sign the other day that read, "If you want to make God really laugh, just tell him your future plans." I now realize that to become old you have to move from passion to compassion. And, I will endure with His help and my children's.

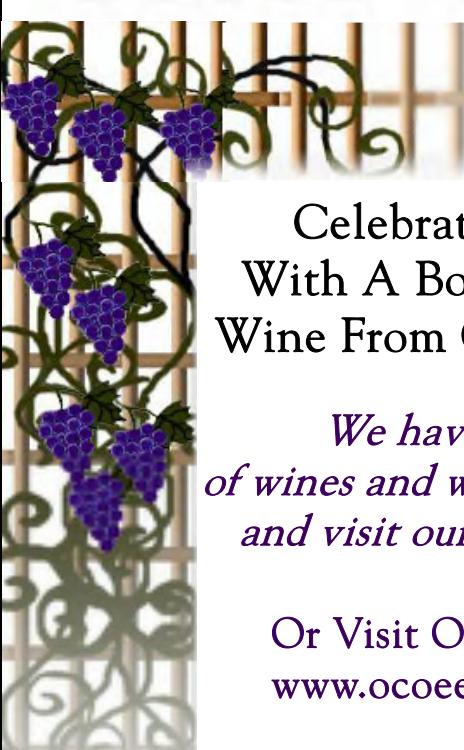
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