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This year as in years past we remember one who has left us. Fred Meijer was about as big as life gets. He lived long and he lived well, a person filled with goodwill, an inquiring mind, and a generous nature. He used his success to enhance his community and help individuals. He was the nicest shrewd man I have ever known.

Recently, our second in age seniority, George Cope, lost his wife Peg. Peg added her spark and wit to these occasions. Though we can expect and accept the ending of human life at our ages when it happens there is a most significant void. George, as you adjust to it, you know you have our emotional support.

Through her husband, Dick, I was told that Barbara Young wanted a repeat of my last year’s remarks analyzing the first names of our members. I can’t bring myself to do it, but some of what I said has had ramifications. Earl Holton has never forgiven me for what I said about his name. It originated amongst English nobility. Earls of the realm could not pass on their titles to bastard sons so they gave them the name instead. He has threatened me and even been nasty. Most recently he wished me a happy 82nd birthday on my 81st. I suggested to him he had his recompense, but he said there is more to come even when I assured him that I knew he, personally, was not a bastard.

Perhaps Barbara related to what I said about her husband’s noble name Richard stemming also from English nobility. Kings, in fact, Richard the Lionheart and Richard the Third, who had heirs to the throne strangled so he could sit on it. When I was in school there were two Richards in my class. One was “Big Dick” and the other “Little Dick.” That’s how we differentiated. Whether her husband is “Big Dick,” “Little Dick,” or both, only Barbara knows.

This year we thought we had a new first name when John Wardrop, our first legacy, was invited to sit in the chair formerly occupied by Fred Meijer. We wanted a name that was traditional yet still used. His name was the reason he was selected. Then to my astonishment I learned that J.C. Huizenga’s first name was John. John is a “ho hum” name really, but when Charles is combined with it as in J.C. it dresses it up. J.C. should consider being known as John Charles Huizenga. People would take note. In any case we have two “Johns” in our group, a fact we do not trumpet abroad.
But tonight is Ralph’s night. Who can demean the name Ralph? I think there should be more Ralphs in the millennial generation. It’s not happening. We do not see Ralphs suckled at their mother’s breasts, nor rocked in the family cradle. It’s a shame. Ralph, however, is doing more than most Ralphs to keep the name alive. We salute him for it in his centennial year. This party is the official ending of his 100th birthday celebration. We declared last year that it would be, but when groups or an individual spot an elderly person who has a significant birthday, they run with it. Americans like to have parties, and often feel a need for a reason for them. Be prepared for your next invitation. Ralph asks “no presents, please.”

On this watershed birthday for Ralph, Susan Lovell and I did some research about centenarians. We were surprised and pleased that there were more centenarians than we expected. It gives us all hope.

Ralph’s distinguished World War II record sent me in search of others who served our country in that conflict. I found Rear Admiral Elliot B. Strauss, 1903-2003, who was the navigator on the cruiser Nashville during the occupation of Iceland in July, 1941. Ralph was in on that occupation. Strauss later joined Lord Louis Mountbatten’s staff, planning the raid on Dieppe in August, 1942, then to the staff of Admiral Ramsey to plan the Normandy invasion. His career and Ralph’s, as a member of Eisenhower’s staff, are remarkably serendipitous.

When Strauss was asked to what he attributed his 100 years, he is reputed to have said, “There is nothing like breathing fresh Icelandic air.” So it is with Ralph.

I sought a living centenarian with a World War II history to demonstrate that life goes on, and I found Clare Hollingworth, born a year before Ralph, now living in Hong Kong. As a journalist, just as Ralph had been before the war, she was sent to the German, Polish border by the London Daily Telegraph to report on what was happening in that potential hot spot. She found herself in the midst of German tanks and troops moving into Poland and called the British Embassy in Berlin to tell the Ambassador war was beginning. The diplomats did not believe her until she held the phone outside the window so they could hear the bullets being fired and the bombs bursting. I saw a photo of Clare at her 100th birthday part. Ralph, you look much healthier.

Bob Hope, like Ralph, was another centenarian whose experience with the military was formative. He performed over 60 USO shows across half a century, entertaining troops during World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the Gulf War. A 1997 act of Congress,
signed by President Clinton, named Hope an Honorary Veteran. He remarked, “I’ve been given many awards in my lifetime – but to be numbered among the men and women I admire most, is the greatest honor I have ever received.”

Now for some longevity inspiration. Jeanne Calment was born in Arles, France in 1875. As well as living through two world wars, Calment also met Vincent Van Gogh while he was staying in Arles, and attended Victor Hugo’s funeral in 1885. At age of 114 she appeared in the film, Vincent and Me, making her the world’s oldest actress. She took up fencing at age 85 and was still riding a bicycle at age 100. She survived a hip operation at age 114 to become the oldest verifiable surgery patient, and remained an ardent smoker until she decided to quit at 117. She lived to be 122. Let’s go Ralph.

When I first hit the web page listing centenarians I came across the category Philanthropist-Socialite. I thought that fit Ralph. His generosity is sprinkled throughout our community. He is socially prominent amongst us, and he loves a party. We all know what a philanthropist is, but socialite needed clarification. Reading on I found a socialite is a person who is rich and unemployed and must be in active contact with the media and other rich unemployed people. A socialite participates in social activities and spends a significant amount of time entertaining and being entertained by others of similar standing. Is that Ralph or not?

The web page continued about in-groups and out-groups. Those who reach 100 years of age are likely to see themselves as an in-group. People have an affinity for ones in-group and 100 years olds have this affinity for one another. You can imagine what an exclusive in-group they are, and how superior they feel to the rest of us who comprise one impossibly large out-group.

In-groups as rarefied as centenarians are likely to have what psychologists call collective narcissism. That is they have an inflated self-love, of themselves and their group. We have not noticed this tendency in Ralph, but how are we who have not attained the century mark to know for sure. If such a thought might trickle into his mind once in a while we can overlook it because he has so much about him to love.

Ralph, being 100 years of age must be a great adventure. You carry it off so well, and because you do, we your friends, are caught up in it. We love you.

As we pause before dinner I will offer the prayer I composed for this occasion last year.
Spirit of love, forgiveness, and salvation, Great God of our lives, we are grateful for friends, associations, and relationships that make us human. That makes it possible for us to love and receive love, to forgive and be forgiven, and to understand what is revealed to us. We know there is reality beyond our comprehension. We know that we are sustained, but we do not penetrate all the mysteries of that sustenance. We are only grateful for it. Please keep us all wrapped tightly in the virtues of love, gratitude, forgiveness, humor, and humility for only then can we really approach you. Amen.