

*A collection of short personal essays created when a stressed career woman decided to become "un-wired" and began writing to uncover life lessons gleaned from family and farm life in Iowa. These funny and poignant essays dip into the magic waters of traditions, childhood memories, and the power of the natural world to comfort and remind us of what is really important.*

## **DIPPING INTO MAGIC WATERS: Essays on Life, Family & Growing Up in Iowa**

by Barbara Hurt Ihde

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## **A Plant Named Joe**

July 14, 2008

This morning was another typical start to a Monday morning. As I stumbled into the kitchen, aiming directly for the coffee pot, Joe caught my attention. He was looking a bit perkier than he had recently. Greener. So I paused, smiled, and told him he was looking good.

Joe is a houseplant. A grape ivy, I think. He sits next to the sink on a pedestal that allows him to sit up at the height of the windows so he has a view. Like most items in my household, there's a story behind the plant and the name.

When my dad, Joe, died some twenty years ago, it seemed everyone sent a plant instead of flowers. I'm sure Mom was comforted that first long winter alone not only by all the lush green plants, but by all the people who sent them. Every plant was different, and there were enough of them to make her dining room feel like a terrarium.

In my memory, the grape ivy was huge — at least two feet across. It was sent from a company my oldest brother used to work for. I still find that touching. These days most corporations seem even more impersonal, letting workers go without notice and with little to no recognition of the worker's contributions. For one to notice that a former employee's father had died — and to acknowledge the loss by sending a plant — amazes me as much today as it did then.

It turns out the grape ivy is a very easy plant to grow. It grows quickly and isn't too fussy about the amount of water or light it gets. Clippings from it grow quickly as well, so soon Mom had extra pots of this plant. She gave one to each of the kids as a reminder of Joe, and soon

there were Joe plants in the family across the United States.

As hardy as grape ivy is, I am still capable of getting it to look poorly or die. Luckily, there are always clippings to begin another plant with. Over the years, then, I've had several different Joe plants. The one in my kitchen came back from Iowa on the train with me in February 2005, doing well despite having to wait outside in the cold for five hours for the train and being tied up in a black trash bag for the entire twenty-hour trip.

When I think about Joe Plant, I realize that I don't seem to be giving a name to things as much as I did years ago. In college, it seemed everyone had a nickname. There are people who I can recall only by their nickname now — their real name is lost from lack of use. Almost every important object had a name, too. I could listen to a conversation about a backpack left in someone's car and think it was an entertaining story about two people.

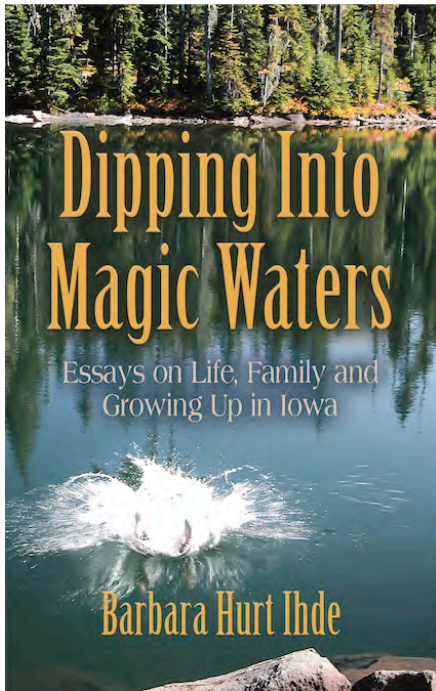
For years I had a large outdoor thermometer with a male deer painted on the face. It was named Buck, and I always smiled as I got my personal weather report from Buck. Now I have a digital thermometer that sits inside. It gives me more information, but with a name of "weather station," I just don't smile like I used to.

Naming items make them feel more familiar or less intimidating. Problems become personality faults, making them easier to deal with. Maybe I don't name things as much these days because it's often done for me: I can buy a GPS system named TomTom, a mobile phone named Blackjack, a car named Golf, and a computer named Mac (or even Dell — I have a human friend named Del).

*Dipping Into Magic Waters*

I've heard that people who travel to places where mountain peaks have no official names give them their own names just to help in communication and navigation. There's a human need to assign names to things. I realize my plant would be named Joe no matter what — if only as shorthand for “the grape ivy Mom gave me that was a clipping from the plant at Joe's funeral.” But along the way, it has become more. I see the traits the plant and my dad shared — quiet, stalwart, not too fussy about when and what they eat. The plant is a visual reminder of the thoughtfulness of those former coworkers, of the power of relationships. It reminds me of the unconditional love and support I got from Dad.

Shakespeare asked, “What's in a name?” That may be why I don't name the objects around like I used to. But sometimes the name is the key. A plant by any other name than Joe would not look so sweet.



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