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December 14th was like a lot of other Fridays. I was on deadline, focused and ignoring the Siren song of social media. There was no time to check the headlines on my favorite internet sites, Facebook or Twitter. When I was almost done, I took a walk to clear my head.

Back at my desk for one final proofread, I couldn't help myself. While waiting for my story to print, I took a peak at Facebook. That's how I learned of the horrible news from Connecticut. With tears in my eyes, I made it through that final proofread, pushed send and called it a day. Like many people, I felt a terrible sadness. Over the weekend, I remembered first grade at Fiske School and my teacher Miss Adams. I thought of the retired teachers in my memoir writing group and some of the stories have written. Their heartfelt care for their students is etched in their words.

And I wondered what I could do. As is often the case, sadness and a sense of helplessness drove me to act, to DO something. This time, I baked. No, I didn't pull out all the stops with a Christmas cookie marathon. Instead I made cupcakes for the teachers at the elementary school. Why? To let them know I was thinking of them and appreciated their dedication to the children in our town.

I soon learned that I was not alone. People across the country were committing small acts of kindness. A man in Los Angeles bought 100 cups of coffee for the people of Newtown. A woman in Massachusetts gave several police officers Dunkin' Donuts gift cards. A woman in Illinois filled two gift bags and gave them to a homeless man. One bag was for him to keep. The other was for him to give away so that he would have the joy of giving as well as receiving.

Ann Curry of NBC News helped send the idea into overdrive when she took to the airwaves asking, "Imagine if everyone could commit to doing one act of kindness for each precious life lost. An act of kindness big or small. Are you in?" If you like the idea and wonder what you can do, here are a few thoughts:

Drop off a bag of groceries at the food bank.
Give a copy of your favorite childhood book to the school library.
Shovel your neighbor's walk.
Put a quarter in a meter that is about to expire.
Give blood or sign up to be an organ donor.
Donate some of your frequent flier miles to Make-a-Wish
Next time you make soup, double the batch and give some to a friend who hates to cook.
Pick up a stranger's check at a restaurant. Leave the waitress a hefty tip.
Help out a friend or neighbor with an afternoon or evening of free babysitting or respite care.
Volunteer at a nursing home, school, homeless shelter, soup kitchen or animal shelter.
Thank a police officer, a firefighter or EMT.
Compliment a stranger. Compliment friends and family too.
Help someone load their heavy groceries in the car.
Hug family and friends.
Share the remote.
Invite that new neighbor to dinner.
Hold the door or help someone up the steps.
Donate \$26 to a children's charity.
Bring a bag along on your next walk and pick up trash.
Be the designated driver.
Call your mom, dad and/or grandparents.
Inspire laughter with a joke or by doing something silly or sharing a funny story.
Visit or call someone who is housebound.
Clean out your closet and donate anything you no longer wear to a thrift shop or shelter.
Send a thank you note to a teacher who positively influenced your life.
Compliment a parent on their well-behaved, smart, talented and/or beautiful offspring.
I'm in. Are you? Share your kind acts with the people around you; not to brag but to inspire others to get involved.

Wishing you a Happy New Year and bon appétit!

Pasta e Fagioli and a Whole Lot More

Try this rich and hearty soup on a cold night. It will warm your body and your soul. Enjoy!

Serves 8-10

Olive oil

About 1 pound hot or sweet Italian sausage, casings removed

About 1 pound boneless chicken thighs or breasts

Sea salt and freshly ground pepper to taste

1 large onion, chopped

3-4 carrots, chopped

3-4 celery stalks, chopped

4 cloves garlic, minced

Pinch dried chili flakes

1 cup dry white wine

12 or more cups chicken stock (add more or less depending on how thick you like your soup)

3-4 sprigs thyme

1 teaspoon finely chopped fresh rosemary

1 bay leaf

3 cups cooked small white beans

1 Parmigiano-Reggiano rind (optional)

4-6 ounces orzo pasta

About 12 ounces spinach (frozen is okay) or 1 head escarole, chopped

Garnish: grated Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese (optional)

Heat a little olive oil in a large soup kettle over medium-high heat. Add the sausage, break the meat up into small pieces and sauté until browned, about 5 minutes. Use a slotted spoon to remove the sausage from the pot and reserve.

Season the chicken with salt and pepper, add it to the pot and sauté each side for 2-3 minutes. Remove the chicken and reserve.

Add the onion, carrots and celery to the pot, season with chili flakes, salt and pepper, and, stirring frequently, cook over medium heat for about 10 minutes or until the onion is translucent. Add the garlic and cook for 1-2 minutes more.

Add the white wine and simmer for 2-3 minutes. Return the sausage and chicken to the pot and add the chicken stock, herbs, beans and Parmigiano-Reggiano rind. Increase the heat to medium high and bring the soup to a simmer. Reduce the heat to low and simmer for about 20 minutes or until the chicken is cooked through and the vegetables are tender.

Remove the chicken from the pot and set aside to cool. Cool the soup to room temperature. When the chicken is cool enough to handle, cut or tear it into bite-sized pieces and add it back to the soup. Store the soup in the refrigerator for several hours or overnight.

Return the soup to the stove and bring to a simmer over medium-high heat.

While the soup heats up, bring a large pot of salted water to a boil and cook the orzo for 5-6 minutes. Drain and rinse the pasta under cold water. Drain again. (For thicker soup, skip this step and add the orzo directly to the soup and cook until al dente.)

Add the par-cooked orzo to the simmering soup and cook, stirring a few times, for 2-3 minutes. Add the spinach in handfuls and continue to simmer until the pasta is al dente and the spinach has wilted, about 3 minutes more. Serve with a sprinkle of grated Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese.