

DOWN HOME: Poignant news from 'a sunny dirt road'

March 17, 2012

You never know when you'll turn a page and stumble back in time. This happened the other day, as I read the latest edition of one of my newsmagazines. A three-word headline leaped from the page, overwhelmed my memory banks and carried me more than 20 years into the past.

"Died: Jan Berenstain."

Instantly, I returned to the middle of an old double bed, lying flat on my back with a book held straight overhead, and two blessedly quiet little girls snuggled next to me.

Those children are my daughters, and it's their bedtime, and I am reading yet "another adventure of the Berenstain Bears."

Jan Berenstain, who died this winter at age 88, and her husband, Stan, who died in 2005, wrote and drew more than 300 children's books about Mama, Papa, Sister and Brother Bear, "who live in a big tree house down a sunny dirt road deep in bear country."

Lindsay, Molly, their Mama and I read those books by the score. Each taught a lesson.

We read *The Berenstain Bears and Too Much TV*, *The Berenstain Bears and the Messy Room*, *The Berenstain Bears and the Trouble with Friends* and not all 300 books, but many others. If you're older than 3 or 4, the titles tell what you need to know about each volume.

The Berenstain Bears reinforced life lessons Joanna and I tried to teach Molly and Lindsay. On their pages, we learned about responsibility,

relationships, compassion, honesty, discipline, love and a host of other virtues.

Jo, Lindsay and Molly will tell you the Bears push only one of my buttons—Papa Bear always is the dumb one. About as often as not, Papa makes the same mistakes and miscues as Sister and Brother, and Mama must intercede to set everyone straight. That may be accurate typecasting. I know Jo's always been a wiser parent than I. But every once in a while, I would've been proud of Papa if he figured out how to do the right thing by himself.

Still, that's a petty problem in return for an imaginative, relevant and compelling collection of object lessons that helped shape our girls' character.

Besides all that, I just love children's books because they provided a terrific reason to turn away from the rest of the world and focus on our children. Those quiet evenings and sleepy Sunday afternoons—a little girl snug by each side, books in our hands, stories swirling through our imaginations—comprise some of the sweetest moments of my life.

As Jo and I raised our daughters, we experienced more-exciting adventures. But I cherish evenings around the dinner table and bedtime book-readings above them all.

So, God bless the memory of Jan and Stan Berenstain, whose little Bear family blessed our own.