

# P NORTHWEST PASSAGES

THE PEOPLE AND PLACES OF NORTHWEST WASHINGTON

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## JUST ENOUGH ROPE

By Amy Longworth



## Miracle on my home computer

It is easy to complain about how technology has ruined our lives: allowed us to substitute electronic relationships for personal ones, vanquished the fine art of letter writing, relegated us to the couch where we grow fat and slothful, and obviated the need to learn practical skills, like reading maps, that could actually come in handy in remote parts of the world where the Hertz NeverLost System is unavailable. (On the other hand, if God had not wanted us to text on our PDAs all day long, then why did he give us opposable thumbs? Or was it Darwin who did that? Confusing.)

Anyway, what I'm getting at is that just when you feel you've had enough with the kilobytes and the microchips,

the pinpoint marketing and the pop-up ads, not to mention the 5-inch-thick user manual badly translated from

Korean explaining how to program your toaster when all you really want is a half a bagel with a bit of cream cheese and you feel so desperate that you might actually go out and do something real, such as go on a 3-mile power walk without wearing your iPod — that is the very moment when you should be most open to miracles. For example, one happened to me just the other day.

It started because I needed a new purse. Only now we call them bags, and for good reason, which I will get to in a minute. I am something of a purse/bag addict, and I hadn't bought a new one in a long time, August I think. Not only that, but my very favorite bag, a citron-yellow slouchy thing from Kenneth Cole, had completely disintegrated and no one was selling that color any more; it was way too 2005. I adored that bag so much that I even went to the extreme measure of trying to have it repaired. I took it to a little, old-fashioned, leather-goods repair shop run by ageless Italian men near Chevy Chase Circle. It smelled like VOCs, which I love and hardly ever get to breathe any more what with all these environ-

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## Alexander returns

Cleveland Park's Judith Viorst pens new book

By **BETH COPE**  
Current Staff Writer

Cleveland Park resident Judith Viorst is best known for her children's best seller "Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day." But in fact she's written nearly three-dozen books, only a third of them for children. The other two-thirds are largely

wry accounts of her climb from twentysomething bohemian to seventysomething grandmother of seven ("When Did I Stop Being Twenty and Other Injustices," "How Did I Get to Be Forty and Other Atrocities," et cetera). Her latest volume, published two weeks ago, returns to an old subject matter — her son Alexander — but presents it from a new perspective.

"Alexander and the Wonderful, Marvelous, Excellent, Terrific Ninety Days" is about the three months when Viorst and her husband, Milton, opened their doors to their son, his wife and their three small children while their house was renovated. And

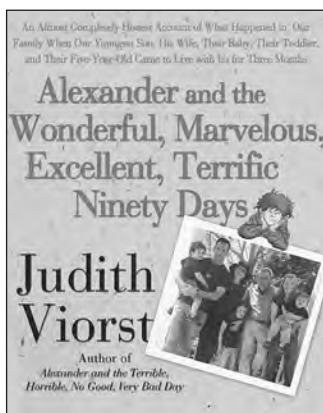
no, the title isn't a fabrication (though perhaps hyperbole); Viorst did find it an excellent experience — though certainly not incident-free.

As with much of Viorst's work, this new book centers on a lovable but flawed central character: a "super-scheduled, over-anxious giver of unsolicited advice." "I tend to be the butt of the joke," she said in a recent interview. "... the most annoying, sometimes impossible and sometimes foolish person in my tales is me."

The book starts with lengthy discussions of her fears pre-90-day visit: disorder to her highly scheduled existence, clashes with Alexander

over unsolicited motherly advice and, most important, sticky fingers on her adult-appropriate furnishings. (No. 1 on her list of house rules: "Of all the places that chocolate shouldn't be eaten, the number-one place is the wine-velvet chair in the library.")

But she goes on to describe the joys of spending so much time with Toby (4 months), Isaac (almost 2 years) and Olivia (5



Courtesy of Free Press

**Writer Judith Viorst is best known for depicting her son Alexander as a child in a beloved storybook. Her latest tome considers him from her new position: grandparent.**

years). The moments with Olivia (known as O in the book) are some of the book's highlights. O spends the summer following her grandmother everywhere — bedroom, kitchen, office, even bath-

room (there are four in the house), where she would "sit down on the floor inquiring, 'When is it my turn — I want to use your potty,'" Viorst wrote.

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## Does the YouTube age require new laws? GWU prof says yes

By **JESSICA GOULD**  
Current Correspondent



Bill Petros/The Current

**GWU Law professor Daniel Solove, who lives in the West End, explores how the Internet can threaten freedom — and what to do about it — in "The Future of Reputation."**

Somewhere in South Korea, a dog poops on a crowded subway, and its owner refuses to clean it up. A fellow passenger snaps a photograph, posts it on a blog, and the "Dog Poop Girl" is instantly famous.

In Canada, a teenager films himself twirling a makeshift light saber. He deposits the video on a dusty shelf and forgets about it. Several months later, someone finds it and posts it on the Internet. The "Star Wars Kid" is a YouTube smash.

And in Washington, D.C., a Capitol Hill staffer begins blogging about her steamy sexcapades. A popular blog discovers the site, and within days, the sex lives of "The Washingtonienne" and her beaux are broadcast to thousands.

For years, the Internet has been synonymous with freedom — of information and of speech. At the click of a mouse, we can access seemingly infinite amounts of data, connect

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## VIORST

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And there are certain matters Olivia can't stop wondering about. "I announce my age every decade or so in the titles of my books," Viorst wrote, "... I conceal it from O, however, because she'd probably save up her money and announce it in a



Eileen Feldman/JCCGW

Judith Viorst, right, signs copies of her new Alexander book as part of the Jewish Community Center of Greater Washington's annual book festival, alongside festival chair Ellen Carroll

full-page ad in the Post."

Being a grandparent is the central theme of the book, and it involves a bit of negotiating.

First, there was the question of grandparental intrusion. "I don't think Alexander and [his wife] Marla worry as much as they should," Viorst said during a talk Friday at the Jewish Community Center of Greater Washington, where she spoke to sympathetic ears. "Having them live under my roof seemed a golden opportunity to raise their anxiety level."

And then there were the changes in parenting over the past 30 or 40 years, including "the disappearance, the banishment, of the playpen," which Viorst "cannot fathom."

"We need a national Bring Back the Playpen movement," she wrote. "I've already written lyrics for a 'Where Have All the Playpens Gone?' national song. ... I'd like to recommend as the motto of this Bring Back the Playpens movement, a stirring Free to Pee — Not You, Just Me."

But by the end of the book, Viorst is writing of her achievements in suppressing the urge to over(grand)parent, partly by repeating mantras like "Don't judge, advise, or criticize. Respect their boundaries and choices. Accept who they are." And she's discussing the joys of being a grandmother. "It's delicious being a grandma — I love

being a grandma," she told the crowd Friday. "People say it's parenthood one step removed. I say it's parenthood one blissful step removed."

In the interview, Viorst said she's finding that readers relate to her tales of searching for one's role with respect to the grandkids.

"I think people really are into this whole business of restraint and respect for their children's rights to live their own lives and raise their grandchildren as they choose," she said. "The issue of keeping your mouth shut seems to not just be an issue for me."

Readers who appreciate the wit in this book might enjoy some of Viorst's poetry collections, particularly the 1987 "When Did I Stop Being Twenty," which includes poems from four of her other books. Chapter 1 is "Village Life," which details life in Greenwich Village. Chapters 2 and 3 are "Married Life" and "Mid-Life."

Right in between the first two, Viorst moved to Washington. "I had been living in Greenwich Village, and I wanted something like that here, because I was very grumpy about leaving Greenwich Village," she explained. "So we lived in Dupont Circle in a brownstone, and we took in borders."

They actually bought several houses — all on Q Street — and rented them out, "because they were practically giving them away back then," she said. "It was pretty

interesting, because, remember, we were there during the beginning of the '60s, and every strange, weird, complicated person ... found their way to our rooming house.

"... We were much too sensitive to ask people if they have any references or if they were employed, so someone would say, 'Well, we just want to live here and make a little home,' and then 18 other people would move in," she continued.

Alexander and his brothers, Anthony and Nicholas, grew up in a house in Cleveland Park where the Viorsts moved in 1971 and still live today (Viorst says the true subject of "Alexander, Who's Not (Do You Hear Me? I Mean It!) Going to Move" is her). They attended Georgetown Day School, which Viorst said was like "a home away from home."

The Cleveland Park house now plays host to an extended Viorst clan, which includes three daughters-in-law and seven grandchildren. The whole crowd will descend for Thanksgiving, which the Viorsts combine with Hanukkah in an effort to celebrate both holidays together. This year, they will add a new tradition, after Olivia suggested adding an additional element to the festivities. "On the Friday after Thanksgiving, we will be lighting the menorah in our Halloween costumes," said Viorst.

## INTERNET

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with strangers across the planet and assume alternate identities. It's a world without limits. And that, says local author Daniel J. Solove, is exactly the problem.

According to Solove, the Internet threatens to trample the very freedoms it once enhanced. "This is a book about how the free flow of information on the Internet can make us less free," he states in the introduction to his new book, "The Future of Reputation: Gossip, Rumor and Privacy on the Internet." It's also a book about what we can do about it.

Solove, a West End resident, is an associate professor at George Washington University Law School. His previous book, "The Digital Person: Technology and Privacy in the Information Age," described how bank statements and credit cards create digital dossiers detailing our lives. That book, he says, is about what other entities do to us. "This one talks about what we're doing to ourselves," he says.

According to Solove, the Internet can make our fleeting revelations permanent and dig up once-buried history. In addition to the Dog Poop Girl, the Star Wars Kid and The Washingtonienne, he mentions a man who spent time in prison, wrote about it and now finds himself dogged by the experience on dates. "All this information about what we have done on the Internet stays there," Solove says. "So the ability to start anew, to have a second chance, to find redemption, goes away." That's especially problematic when we aren't the ones publicizing our pasts, Solove says. "The Star Wars Kid, whether he likes it or not, is

always going to be the Star Wars Kid," he says. "Apparently, it had a really horrible impact on his life."

For that reason, Solove argues, the law must be expanded to "modernize" our concept of privacy. Historically privacy law stayed away from public spaces, but, now, he says, it's time for that to change. As the dog-poop incident demonstrates, isolated events can reach far beyond their immediate audience. "The laws should begin to recognize some degree of privacy in public," he says in his book.

Plus, in cases like The Washingtonienne, which included "very intimate information about [someone's] sex life," the law should provide incentives to keep that information out of the public domain. "An incentive could be the threat of being sued," he says.

Broadening privacy law to suit the Information Age won't be easy, though, and any expansion must not restrict First Amendment rights. After all, he says, "if we go too far in the privacy department, it chills free speech."

Solove, who began contemplating privacy in the context of the Internet in the 1990s, compares it to an adolescent, still developing but beginning to test its boundaries. "When I started looking into privacy issues, I was amazed at how many issues there were and how complex and interesting they were. The topic of privacy ... has kept me enthralled for nearly a decade," he wrote in an e-mail.

And unfortunately, there are no easy answers. "Both privacy and free speech are great values, and dealing with situations when they clash is difficult because one clearly doesn't outweigh the other," he says in the e-mail. "A delicate balance must be struck."

To learn more about Solove's book, visit [futureofreputation.com](http://futureofreputation.com).

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