

*The Gift of*  
**INGENUITY**



*By Jill Byington*

I have always been interested in the meaning behind words. For example, the words “ingenuity” and “ingénue” fascinate me because they both have the same French root word, but in English they have meanings that seem to oppose one another. A person who has ingenuity is someone who is imaginative or clever, but an ingénue is a person who is innocent or naïve. Still, linguistics aside, I’m not so sure there’s a true conflict in meaning.

It all goes back to a 1963 Volkswagen Beetle. The car was old when I was learning to drive, and it had survived my two older sisters’ driving lessons already. The fenders were dented, and it rattled when it went down the road, but we were lucky to have a car at all. Our family had survived economic hard times, and my parents were working hard to pull us through. Meanwhile, through most of my childhood, if something broke, we fixed it, did without it, or found a different way to do it.

So, when reverse gear in the Volkswagen broke and we couldn’t afford the part to fix it my Dad said, “Who needs reverse?” So we drove forward.

We were lucky to have a driveway that went uphill to the house. We could pull the car in front-first to park at home, and then just put it in neutral and roll backward out of the driveway, taking a sharp turn at the bottom of the hill to put the car nose-straight

and ready to drive forward down the road. In parking lots, we chose only spots where we could pull through into the spot in front, ready to leave going forward again. If all else failed, the car was light enough for one person to push downhill or on the flat, or we could recruit a passerby to help push if needed. That didn't happen often. Frankly, we began to wonder if reverse could be considered as much of a luxury add-on in a car as air conditioning or a stereo.

I enjoyed the challenge of always driving forward, but I was still embarrassed. Many of my peers were much better off. I envied their brand-new cars, clothes, and homes, and often wondered what it would be like to have the latest style of clothes, or the latest of *anything* for that matter. I was the third sister in the hand-me-down line, and my oldest sister got her clothes from a well-off friend of ours. That put me at least four years behind the fashion curve. I anticipated a day when I could keep up with the latest and greatest on my own and not have to be embarrassed in front of anyone.

I still remain four years behind the fashion curve. Now it's a bit by choice and a bit because I learned what it's like to have the latest of everything – it's expensive and new things break just as easily as old things. I am grateful for the stamina and perspective that hard times gave me, and I've used everything I learned to press through difficulties of my own. I know now that there are many things that shouldn't be done, but very few things that can't be done.

Just like the time the Volkswagen lost reverse gear, I never question that when reverse isn't possible you can always go forward, and so I find the ingenuity to do it.

## *Doing Without*

A good way to learn ingenuity is to imagine how life might be without certain things. You'd be surprised at how easy it is to think of more than one way to get something done. Who knew we'd be able to drive a car without reverse gear and have no problems. Here are a few ideas for you to think about. You can do some research online or in the library to find new ways to do these things.

*How would you clean your teeth without toothpaste?*

*How would you keep cool or stay warm without electricity?*

*How would you get to work or school without a car or someone to drive you?*

*How would you have fun with friends without much money?*

*How would you go to college without a scholarship?*



*"Who needs reverse? Find a way to go forward." Jill Byington*