

## IN ITS TIME: The Genesis of a Project

It was a perfect summer day: warm, sunny and carefree. My husband Leo and I were on vacation, leisurely driving west along southern Massachusetts, when we came upon a lovely miniature golf course built on a hill. We stopped to play a round of golf, as we had done many times before in other places. Our pleasure was doubled that day: we enjoyed the game, and the exquisite landscaping was a feast for our eyes. What beautiful flowerbeds and shrubs! My mind flew to God, who designed and made such a variety of plants in the first place. God: the originator of beauty!

Leo and I were both up to the challenge of the course. Then we came to a downhill hole near the end marked "Par 4." I thought the hole was mislabeled and sure enough, my ball sank out of sight in only two strokes! When I went to retrieve the ball, it wasn't there. Where was it? Only then did we discover that this hole was in two parts. My ball had dropped down to a new surface and needed to be played again. No problem, I thought. The ball had landed so close to the hole that I should still be below par, and I was. But again, where was my ball? What do you know? This hole had not two sections, but three! By then I was laughing heartily, really enjoying myself in the presence of God and my husband.

Then a melody began running around in my head, an original tune with words: "He has made everything beautiful in its time." Why, I believe that's a Bible verse, I thought. At that time God often gave me tunes for verses so that they would stick in my mind. Leo and I went to the outdoor refreshment stand near the parking lot and I got my Bible from the car. There it was: Ecclesiastes 3:11, word for word. Leo waited patiently while I captured the song on paper. It's lovely music that always brings back the memory of that happy day.

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It seems to me that I was always doing some kind of creative writing. The first story I remember was written when I was eight years old. Our third grade reader had a series of stories about a duck named Waddles Junior. Our teacher challenged us to write original stories about this duck, and the best story would be printed in the school newspaper. (No, I didn't win. The published story was written by my classmate Frances; mine came in second.)

Somehow a collection of poems that I wrote when I was nine and ten has survived. It is evident that they were written by a child, but a skill in rhythm and rhyme is also evident. And when I was in fifth grade I started writing a novel on the order of the Bobbsey Twins. Alberta, a sixth grade friend, offered to type my chapters as they were completed. I don't think I got past chapter four. In those years I tried keeping diaries. I would start out full of hope every January, generally do well until the fall, and then stop. My one surviving diary is like that. It is from 1947 when I was thirteen and fourteen. I began skipping days in September. October has only a few entries, and then there are no more. My attempts to keep a journal at various times were also sporadic – and undated.

I not only co-wrote plays in my childhood summer days but also co-directed them with Raymond, my childhood friend. Throughout my adult life I wrote many creative programs and pageants for holiday celebrations at church and elsewhere. But it was in 1992 that my writing went onto a higher plane. That year, having no idea what to give our married children and their spouses for Christmas, I decided to "give a gift that money can't buy": the start of a family history in the form of stories. Leo joined me in the first few years of the project. We just started writing about anything we wanted to: our childhood, our children, siblings, parents ... anything! Later on I added pictures and photocopies of documents. The project has continued until now. Our children have boxes of individual items with no sense of organization. That seems to be the only way I am able to write.

The elusive dream of having something in print actually came to fruition in 1999. I had written a series of 42 short meditations called "Words of Encouragement from God." That, of course, refers to Bible verses that I find encouraging. At the bottom of the title page I wrote, "With comments by Verna Mae Kwiatkowski, one whom God has encouraged." After each passage of Scripture I wrote a paragraph telling what it means to me. I sent a copy of my work to a friend in Cairo, Egypt, and before long it was translated into Arabic and published as a book in Egypt!

That did not completely satisfy my dream, however. I don't know how many times in the past few years I contacted my friend Rosemary with the words, "I think I've just written the first chapter of my book!" She would patiently listen, make all sorts of encouraging comments, ask pertinent questions, and then ... I would go home, file the "chapter" under "Projects Underway" and start writing something else!

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My first written song was composed at the suggestion of my piano teacher. The piano series from which I was studying had some pages consisting of manuscript lines and an assignment as to what type of song to write. I think I only wrote one of these original songs, but since I kept my music books until recently, I can still play that song in my mind.

I also remember the first song that I copied by hand: the sheet music for "It Might As Well Be Spring." My childhood friend Patsy bought the sheet music in our local Ben Franklin Store. It probably cost less than twenty-five cents, but that was more than I could afford. So I made some manuscript paper and copied the whole song! Little did I know how much music I would write by hand in the coming years (on paper I had purchased!).

From 1962 to 1972 I taught accordion and piano lessons in a music studio in my town. Before long I was directing accordion bands as well. Sometimes this involved writing some original music for recitals or copying an out-of-print piece that I wanted to use. And in the 1970s we had a family orchestra in our own home! Eventually we had six red notebooks, one for each of our five children and one for me. We traveled around giving concerts using our extensive repertoire of songs, mainly hymns. Every time I arranged a new song, I wrote the parts into our notebooks by hand – and enjoyed doing it.

And then in 1977 something new happened. I was reading the book of Galatians in my Bible, becoming more excited as I read. When I got to Galatians 5:1, I sang it! *"It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery."* I went to the piano and played the song; then I wrote it down. I was both stunned and pleased. God wanted me to pay attention to that verse and he used music to make sure I would remember the lesson. That song was the first of over 500 scriptural and devotional songs that I have written and used extensively, both personally and in my ministry.

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People have always remarked that my thoughts and teachings were both different and beneficial. If this is true, it is due to my relationship with God. The Lord is the source of my creativity. For years I have wondered if all the wonderful thoughts on which I have based my life are just for me and my circle of friends, or were they for a wider group, for people who don't even know me? And if I did write for possible publication, which of my many ideas would I develop?

One thing I knew for sure: if I wrote anything about my life, it would have to consist of a collection of short pieces, incorporating some of the material I have already written. Two pictures from my Pennsylvania Dutch background describe what I had in mind: a patchwork quilt and a hearty beef stew. I love patchwork quilts and have made some myself. I like a variety of colors and shapes, all

forming one cozy, useful blanket. And I enjoy beef stew. Such a variety of vegetables can simmer with the meat to make a delicious meal! Perhaps my mixture of creative works could also make a useful whole. Now that I knew the form, what would be the subject?

And then came my neurological diagnosis. I had Primary Lateral Sclerosis (PLS), a progressive disease that would eventually take away the use of my legs, arms and hands, my speech and normal swallowing – and then my life. Suddenly some topics did not seem so important anymore! In December, 2003, I sent out a large mailing of what became known as “The Incarnation Letter,” explaining my thoughts about my condition. The response was overwhelmingly favorable, with “different” and “helpful” turning up again and again in the comments. Now I knew: I would write my thoughts on ageing and dying. They seemed normal to me, but perhaps they are not. Also, writing them down would solidify in my own mind the philosophy of life that I have been living by. Would my foundation in God prove to be solid rock or would it be sinking sand in light of my diagnosis? My writings and the passage of time would tell.

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Now that I had my topic, how would I proceed? The same way I usually did. I would begin to list titles for essays and start writing whichever one seemed to demand my attention at the moment. In addition I would look through my files to see what material from the past could be incorporated into this work. Could I add some songs? Some poetry? Why not? Let’s make this a beautiful patchwork quilt; a tasty pot of stew.

My mother and her mother (my Grandma Hicks, who lived next door), could not have been more different in their thinking. Grandma used to let me brush her hair after a shampoo. “Notice all the white hair underneath,” she would say. Mom had me pull out her gray hair! Grandma didn’t mind birthdays. She knew she was still young on the inside – and she was! The poem “Not Growing Old,” which I found in her Bible, explains how she felt about age.

Mom hated birthdays. I remember so clearly the day she turned forty. It was 1949. I was 15, my brother Harold was 13, and our little brother Bobby was three months shy of 3. For weeks Dad, Harold and I had worked hard on a birthday surprise for Mom: we taught Bobby to sing Happy Birthday. The day arrived and we proudly said to Bobby, “Sing the song we taught you to sing.” Out of Bobby’s mouth came the only other song he knew: “The old gray mare, she ain’t what she used to be.” Mom was devastated – and so were we! She refused to believe that we had not put Bobby up to that trick!

Nature gives us a splendid lesson about age every year. Here in the northeastern United States we are treated each fall to a grand show as the tree leaves turn color and prepare to die. The show can be breathtaking, almost too beautiful to take in. I like to think that people can be like that: having a beauty in old age that is outstanding, no matter what their physical condition. Look for that beauty, even as death approaches!

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I hope these essays and miscellaneous pieces work well as a whole for you. Each is meant to stand alone. There will be some repetition. (The same Bible story may apply to more than one topic, for example. There will also be much about Heaven in my collection.) May you see with me that “God has made everything beautiful IN ITS TIME”: even old age and dying. To God be the glory. Amen.

## ADDITIONS TO THE ESSAY "IN IT'S TIME"

### Music to "In Its Time" and the poem, "Not Growing Old"

When I reread "In Its Time" recently, I realized that the addition of two items mentioned in the text would enhance the mixture that I intend for this collection. First of all, here is the tune that came to my mind for Ecclesiastes 3:11 on the happy day in Massachusetts. I hope you enjoy it as much as I do!

The second is the poem that I found in my grandma's Bible. Years ago I added to it some commentary plus her picture and gave it to our children as part of their family history Christmas gift. Now I'm giving it to you. I believe the poem is by John E. Roberts. What a great attitude my grandma had! I am fortunate to have lived under her influence.

Ecclesiastes 3:11 (NIV) *In Its Time* Verna Mae Kwiatkowski

The musical score is handwritten on four staves. The first staff begins with a treble clef, a key signature of one flat (Bb), and a 3/4 time signature. The melody is written with eighth and quarter notes. Above the staff, the title "In Its Time" is written in a decorative script. The second staff continues the melody and includes the lyrics "He has made ev-'ry-thing beau-ti-ful in its — time." with a first ending bracket. The third staff continues the melody with the lyrics "its — time. In its ti-me, beau-ti-ful! In its ti-me, beau-ti-ful! Oh, he has made ev-'ry-thing beau-ti-ful". The fourth staff concludes the piece with the lyrics "in its — time." and a final double bar line. Chord symbols (Bb, Eb, F7) are written above various notes throughout the score.

He has made ev-'ry-thing beau-ti-ful in its — time.

its — time. In its ti-me, beau-ti-ful! In its ti-me, beau-ti-ful! Oh, he has made ev-'ry-thing beau-ti-ful

in its — time.

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## NOT GROWING OLD

A poem copied by my grandma, Annie King Hicks Gibbel, found among her papers. The author is not noted, but I believe it is John E. Roberts. This poem accurately reflects Grandma's philosophy of life and her deep faith.

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They say that I am growing old;  
I've heard them tell it times untold,  
In language plain and bold –  
But I am NOT growing old.

This frail old shell in which I dwell  
Is growing old, I know full well –  
But I am not the shell.

What if my hair is turning gray?  
Gray hairs are honorable, they say.  
What if my eyesight's growing dim?  
I can still see to follow Him  
Who sacrificed His life for me  
Upon the cross of Calvary.

What should I care if Time's old plow  
Has left its furrows on my brow?  
Another house, not made with hand,  
Awaits me in the Glory Land.

What though I falter in my walk?  
What though my tongue refuse to talk?  
I still can tread the narrow way.  
I still can watch, and praise and pray.

My hearing may not be so keen  
As in the past it may have been,  
Still, I can hear my Savior say,  
In whispers soft, "This is the way."

The outward man, do what he can  
To lengthen out this life's short span,  
Shall perish and return to dust  
As everything in nature must.

The inward man, the Scriptures say,  
Is growing stronger every day.  
Then how can I be growing old  
When safe within my Savior's fold?

Ere long my soul shall fly away  
And leave this tenement of clay.  
This robe of flesh I'll drop and rise  
To seize the "Everlasting Prize."  
I'll meet you on the streets of gold  
And prove that I'm not growing old!



*My grandma in front of our house  
on South Lancaster Street, Annville,  
Pennsylvania, about 1946.*

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My grandma died on June 12, 1960 at age 81. I visited and talked with her just a few hours before she "flew away." She was bedfast, but she certainly was not old! I'll see you in Glory Land, Grandma!