

A ROOM WITH A VIEW: FROM DRUM HILL TO SKY VIEW

Wednesday, February 15, 2006. Three years ago today I fell in a shoe store in Yorktown Heights, New York and broke my hip. Since July, 2002 something strange had been going on in my body that affected my stability, causing me to fall from time to time. But I had no idea that after my hip surgery I would never again walk without an assistive device, nor that the time was coming when I would not be able to walk at all.

Changes in my body led to changes in our living conditions as well. Three years ago Leo and I lived in our house on Mead Street in Yorktown Heights. In mid-January, 2004 we moved into an apartment at Drum Hill Senior Living Community in Peekskill, NY and subsequently sold our house. Leo is still at Drum Hill, at least for the time being, but I made another move on December 29, 2005, nearly seven weeks ago. I now live in a room in the nursing home section of Sky View Health Care Center in Croton-on-Hudson, NY, four miles from Drum Hill. In this essay I want to reconstruct, as best I can, the events leading up to my latest move. The fingerprints of God are all over this story, which I now tell for his glory.

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The thought of some day having to live in a nursing home had been in my mind for years, fueled, I suppose, by my mother's outspoken revulsion against doing any such thing herself. I looked at living in a nursing home as an admission that your body had reached a point where being in a place with a staff trained to give you TLC was not only necessary but desirable. Mom saw it as a loss of independence and an admission of growing old. Her relentless harping on the subject had a wearing effect on me that I did not want to impose on my own children some day. To prevent this, I wrote a document perhaps a dozen years ago, in which I clearly stated that I was willing to go to a nursing facility if circumstances made it sensible to do so. Knowing how dementia can change your behavior, I said that if I did put up resistance when the time came, my children were to ignore that and go with the document, as it was written when my mind was clear. My witness and I signed the paper, copies of which I gave to Marty and George. And that was that – until June, 2005.

The transition to Drum Hill from the house was easy for me once I knew I could take my computer and files with me. There were some neighbors that I would miss, but they were gracious, understanding the situation. I thrived at Drum Hill, starting a Friday evening worship service after residing there for three and a half months. That worship service was such a joy to me, and also to the residents who attended, to my friends who came in from outside Drum Hill and to George and his family, who were heavily involved in every service.

It was also at Drum Hill that my writing career took off. I wrote a story called "Flashback" shortly after moving there, and occasionally jotted some thoughts about ageing and dying onto my computer after that, while continuing to teach Bible studies and speak with my waning voice. "When am I going to seriously write?" I asked my Tuesday night class that summer. To my amazement, one woman suggested we disband for a while so I could concentrate on writing. And so it was that in August, 2004 I looked through my computer files to see if I could turn my jottings into essays. Soon I had some short ones completed, "Flourishing in Old Age" and "The Riddle" among them. Then came a poem called "Outwardly," after which my mind just flooded with ideas, more than my fingers could handle. By Christmas I had a set of 15 essays to send our children, including "Flashback."

The Tuesday Bible study never did resume, mainly because my voice was almost gone by then. In November George began moderating the worship services, including helping with the sermons. After the Christmas series, I wanted to plan the services and suggest the sermons, but have George develop them. He would have none of that! George loved doing the services, but he made it abundantly clear that he wanted to read my writings as sermons. "That would be impossible – unless the sermons were parts

of essays,” I countered. “I can’t write both.” And so it was that all through 2005 most essays served as from one to four sermons as well. By this past Christmas I had completed 39 essays, with several more well underway. I am truly amazed not only by the amount of writing, but also with how well the essays have been received by those who have read them. Truly God is guiding this project!

Physically there was a big change in June, 2005. First I got a feeding tube, spending almost three weeks away from home in the process. When I got back to Drum Hill, I needed so much more personal care, both hired and from family and friends. On July 1 George sent an email to the whole family describing my situation and outlining a plan of action. Thinking it only fair that I be informed, he showed me a copy of the email a couple days later. It said in part: “Our thought is to reevaluate by mid-August. We will investigate skilled care facilities in the area, so we can know what our best options are in case Mom should need an increased level of care.” George, Janet and Marty actually did look at three places during the summer.

Meanwhile I was getting used to my new routine; somehow a nursing home seemed far away to me. A couple times Marty tried to talk about it, but I put barriers up with involuntary shudders that puzzled even me. She said more than once, “We are going to keep you at Drum Hill as long as possible.” She also assured me that they were looking for a private room where I could continue to write.

One day after Marty left, I was so upset that I decided to explore my feelings by writing a new essay. Perhaps I would call it “Decisions, Decisions: Facing a Nursing Home.” I began to type furiously, eyes on the keyboard. When I did glance at the monitor, I was shocked to find only two letters there from the last word I had been typing, those two letters being in the center of a new page. All I could figure out was that with my stiff fingers and the speed with which I was writing, I hit a combination of keys that commanded the computer to do exactly what it did – delete the few lines I had written. I decided to abandon the project. But I continued to think about my reactions to the thought of entering a nursing home.

In October and November, 2005 I wrote entries in “A Penny For Your Thoughts” about the nursing home issue. Two changes loomed large: leaving Leo and ending the worship services. I was also concerned about cleanliness, based on my experience in a rehabilitation center after getting my feeding tube. Besides this, I just didn’t feel in my spirit that the time for moving was imminent. Either that, or I just was not facing reality.

In December much was going on that in hindsight was all interrelated. God was certainly watching over his daughter! A visit from my friend Carol was crucial. Her faith is so inspiring! She told me about the difficult circumstances surrounding the birth of her son. She considered her bulging abdomen to be a “mountain” and asked the Lord to remove this “mountain” by faith. Labor was long and hard. Carol said she felt the pain but emphasized that she was never afraid. Finally she had a baby boy to hold in her arms. After that I began to think of leaving Leo and everything connected with ending the services as two “mountains” that I could trust the Lord to handle in his way at the right time. I also knew from the past that God would let me know when it was the right time to move. Meanwhile, I had Christmas services to prepare.

I decided to have three Christmas services in 2005, each one building on the other: The Perfect Plan on December 9; The Perfect Parents (Mary and Joseph) on December 16; and The Incredible Incarnation on December 23. For the 23rd, which we were calling our Christmas Eve service, a wonderful treat was in the making. Frank, a man from my daughter Marty’s church, arranged to have six members of their youth group volunteer to sing as a choir for that service. He would come also to introduce the young people to me. We announced this on the 16th and the anticipation was high. Then early that week I got word from Frank that he was ill and would not be able to come Friday evening. What’s more, the youth group wouldn’t be coming either. By email I explained the situation to Cliff Cullum, a regular member of our worship team, asking if he could get a few members of his church choir to come Friday night. He emailed back that I would have a choir for that night. That’s all I needed to know to set my mind at ease.

And then came a day that is extra-special in my memory: Wednesday, December 21, 2005. I knew that George and Marty had taken the day off from work and that they, along with Janet, were going to visit four nursing homes in the area, a full day's work indeed! I was busy, too. George and family were going to be on vacation the weekend after Christmas, so I had to make alternate plans for Friday, December 30. I did consider canceling the worship service for that week and taking a much needed break, but Cliff Cullum and Carol Thorne were so willing to fill in for George that I decided to give them the chance. To be fair to my friends, I needed to choose the hymns and finish writing the sermon in the next few days.

Late in the afternoon George came floating through our kitchen into the living room, where I was seated in my Powerchair. I'd never seen such a spring in his steps! Soon he was followed by Janet and Marty, who joined him on the sofa. I sat facing three beautiful, obviously happy people, wondering about the source of their joy. "How would you like to live in a luxury hotel?" Marty asked. The last place that they visited had overwhelmed them with its beauty and the quality of care it offered. All of them remained wide-eyed as they extolled the virtues of Sky View Health Care Center in Croton-on-Hudson, just four miles away. Not only did they love the facility, but there was also a private room currently available that they thought would be perfect for me. "It has a wonderful view of the Hudson River and the Croton train station! It has plenty of room for your computer setup! You would be able to drive your chair from place to place in the room! And it's so pretty!" With all their exclamations, they still made it clear that the decision was mine to make.

By then I was wide-eyed too. Looking back, this is the way I picture what was happening. My children were having a wonderful time playing with a jumping rope. The rope itself was called "joy." Two of them were turning the ends and the other was jumping. All three were smiling and looking at me. Without words, they were clearly inviting me to jump rope with them. And all of a sudden I knew that there was nothing I'd rather do than jump the rope of joy with my dear ones. My face lit up to match theirs. I said I would not only go to Sky View, but I would go now; I wanted the room they had chosen for me. Marty said I had just given my children a wonderful Christmas gift, and that added to my joy. Something very spiritual was happening in our living room that afternoon. The God of Peace was there making a straight path out of what had been a maze. It was awesome!

The next day George secured the room for me. Now all that remained was to set a moving date. I knew that Marty had taken the next week off from work and that George's family wanted to go away New Year's weekend. If all the paper work were completed, I thought Thursday, December 29 might work for all of us, but I didn't want to make a final decision until after the worship service.

And then the time came for me to drive to the recreation room for the service. How beautiful the room looked with various real and artificial floral pieces gracing the front table and the window sills! What a joy it was to watch the congregation assemble! All the faithful members from Drum Hill were there, each one so dear. George and Janet were there with all three of their sons, as Eric was home from college. I was amazed at seeing all the people come in from the "outside," especially all the members of the United Methodist Church at Shrub Oak who would be our choir for the night. We had to get extra chairs as people kept coming. In all, at least 45 people came, our largest attendance ever.

Oh, what a service we had that night! God was surely directing us all, taking care of every detail. We, in turn, brought glory to God by wholeheartedly joining in with the singing and readings. The choir consisted of fifteen members of the church and Leo, whom Maxine, a choir member, thoughtfully invited to join them. The choir stood up front and lead us in the wonderful carols of the season. Dick and Cathy sang "O Holy Night" as a duet, just as I had heard them do in church in prior years. George played the piano and his sons Evan and Andrew played the trumpet and violin, respectively. The rafters fairly rang with music that night! Leo, Cliff and Eric all took part with readings and prayers. George moderated the service and read the sermon. We ended with a rousing rendition of "Joy to the World" – and then it was over.

People came up front to talk with me at the conclusion, full of compliments. Years ago I had learned from Corrie Ten Boom to graciously accept the compliments and later present them as a bouquet of flowers to

the Lord, for they are rightfully his. When Janet's parents approached me, Fred leaned over and said, "I hope this is not the last one, but if it is, it was wonderful." Obviously, they knew my latest news.

Back in our apartment, George, Janet and I conferred about the move. I told them I was wondering about Thursday and George thought Thursday would be fine. We realized, then, that there would be no worship service the next Friday; the services were over. George and I were both glad that we hadn't known for sure that the Christmas service was our last. Now one mountain was gone, and gone in such a way that I knew God had removed it.

Over the weekend I wrote a letter to those residents who regularly attended the services, telling them what had happened. Wanting to alleviate the blow the best I could, I decided to give them each a copy of my book "Words of Encouragement" along with the letter. George came to Drum Hill Monday afternoon to help me distribute the packets. Things were going well until the recreation director said they would miss me. Then I started crying and could not stop. George stayed with me until I calmed down and then finished the distribution himself. I knew then that I would not be able to mingle with the residents anymore, but that was all right: I had packing to do.

The next days are a blur in my memory. I do remember sending emails to my family with two requests that they handled. One was that Leo not say goodbye to me when I was leaving and the other was that the staff let me leave Drum Hill quietly. Both requests were granted. Thursday morning came and so did Paratransit. Leo was having brunch with Eric at the time. I drove onto the rear of the bus while Marty entered through the front door. The driver got into his seat and we were on our way to Croton and the next chapter of my life.

Once inside Sky View, it was easy to see why my children were impressed with the place. It is beautifully decorated! There are large framed pictures everywhere, even in the elevators. The wallpaper, the carpeting mixed with sections of wood flooring, and the furnishings are much more than functional, but pretty as well. The total effect made me feel like I was moving into an art museum, a pleasant prospect indeed! Christmas decorations were everywhere, lavish yet tasteful.

My room is truly lovely and more than adequate in size. It is approximately 16 feet by 13 feet, plus an entry containing a large closet, and a bathroom. Besides my bed, the room came with a bureau, two smaller chests, a very large bookcase, two table lamps and an upholstered chair. In addition, a large oval mirror was mounted on the wall. Everything matched very well and was certainly pleasing to my eyes. The wallpaper is a golden hue with a deep floral border at the top featuring green, red-orange and gold colors. These same colors appear in the bedspread and window treatment provided by Sky View, a wonderful contrast to the dark color of the wood.

Almost the entire end of the outside wall of my room is taken up with a twelve foot picture window, divided into three sections, each with a Venetian blind consisting of dark colored wooden slats. And from that window, what a view can be seen! The centerpiece is a large section of the Hudson River, flowing south. I also see the tracks leading to and from the Croton train station. Besides that, there are rolling hills covered with trees and all kinds of buildings. And sky! So much sky!

At night the hills and shore line are rimmed with lights, white and yellow mostly, sprinkled with reds and greens. The lights remind me of jewels sparkling in all their beauty. Some of the lights move, letting me know where the highways are. The first morning I awoke to a beautiful pink sky caused by the sunrise! It was the start of a new day in more ways than one. With seasonal changes and the entertainment that comes from watching the birds that gather on the entrance overhang that I can also see, I know I will never get tired of the view from my window.

George said that of all the qualities he was looking for in a nursing home, he never thought of listing beauty as a desirable asset, though it certainly is. I went into such detail above to see if I could adequately convey to others what my eyes see and appreciate. It's easier to say, "Come and see!" than to

try to use words. As you might imagine, I use my surroundings as a springboard to thrust my thoughts Heavenward. Now there's a place that human words can only begin to describe. I am so glad that some day I will go and see! Are you anticipating Heaven? That attitude really helps remove the sting from our earthly trials. Beauty here is temporary at best. Beauty There is constant and there are no trials!

My family added to my room another bookcase, a large desk surface that holds my computer and email device, a one drawer file that also holds my printer/copier, a couple more lamps, some pictures and a wonderful television set with built-in video and DVD players, plus folding chairs for visitors. I have everything I need!

Leo visits me daily, though that is not something I expect him to do. The mountain of leaving Leo that once loomed large is no longer there; it was leveled by God's grace. The increased responsibilities for my personal care that fell on Leo after I got my feeding tube were hard on him. I'm glad he could be relieved of nursing duties by my move, though that was only one factor in my making the change.

Thursday, March 9, 2006. I have now finished my report of the transition from Drum Hill to Sky View. It is no surprise to me that the Solid Rock Foundation on which I have built my life held firm once again, even though I experienced some battering. I allowed myself time to adjust after I arrived at my new home, time to "be" rather than to "do." I also abandoned the thought of trying to figure out my emotions of last summer. We are complex beings; no need to analyze everything.

And then things began to happen here, just as they had at Drum Hill and in our house before that. God's kingdom work can be carried on from any location! And everywhere there is kingdom work to be done. I remain in awe of God, who never makes a mistake. I have no complaints!

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