

A Tribute to My Mother: Florence Eva Hicks Ziegler

An excerpt from the essay "Eulogies: In Praise of My Parents"

Introduction: Mom died May 5, 2006 at the age of 97, in the nursing section of the Lebanon Valley Brethren Home in Pennsylvania. The service was held at Kreamer's Funeral Home in Annville, PA on May 10. I, a resident of a nursing home myself, was not able to be there. As the beginning of the tribute to my mother explains, I prepared it to be handed out to those attending her funeral, and it was. But there was also a bonus: my son George read it aloud to the assembled people! My brother Bob taped the service for me, allowing me to hear what a fine job George did as my substitute. My thanks to both of them.

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When I first wrote this tribute in March, 2003, Mom was receiving hospice care; therefore I assumed she had only a brief time to live. I wanted to have something written that I could read at her funeral in case I suddenly heard that she was gone. How things have changed! Mom's condition stabilized and hospice was discontinued. On the other hand, I was diagnosed with PLS, a neurological disease that is crippling me, including my ability to talk. Mom no longer recognizes people. That means she does not miss me or know I am ill; I find this comforting. I do not know if I will be able to attend her funeral; I might die before she does! Certainly I will not be able to read this tribute aloud, so I am revising it now, in November, 2004, to be distributed at her funeral. This is what I would like you to know about my mom.

The first quality I can remember my mother giving me is hope. At the end of my first year of school I was heartbroken because my first grade teacher and our music teacher were leaving the school district. I couldn't bear the thought of not seeing them again. Mom said, "Maybe we can visit them sometime." It was not a promise, just a possibility – and it was enough to dry my tears. I held onto that hope until it no longer mattered that the teachers were gone. Mother was always careful not to get herself boxed in with promises; rather, "We'll see" was her usual response to my requests. This, too, built hope within me, for sometimes the requests were fulfilled; I just never knew for sure.

Recently Mom asked me if people know each other in Heaven. It was *my* turn to give *her* hope. "Absolutely!" I said. Mom relaxed, her eyes glistening with tears that she was reluctant to shed in my presence. And that's another thing: Mom kept a lot of her thoughts and feelings to herself, not wanting to upset her children. Mom had good intentions, but perhaps we would have benefitted from knowing more about what was going on.

Being secretive *can* be a positive quality. For example, Mom was not a gossip! She enjoyed working in various factories, operating sewing machines and doing her work well. Sometimes an operator would send a juicy bit of gossip down the row of seamstresses, hoping to reach everybody. "Skip over Florence," the ladies used to say. "She's so tight-lipped the news will stop with her!" I always felt so proud of Mom when I heard that story.

I knew nothing of our financial situation as a child. Later I came to realize that money was sometimes in short supply in our family. I was often sick and spent much time in doctors' offices, even in hospitals. Never did Mom or Dad even hint that my illnesses caused them financial stress. "We were just glad that we had the money for the doctors," Mom said when I asked her about that as a teenager. What a relief that was to my ears – and to my soul!

Mom and Dad relied on actions rather than words to let us know we were loved. Mom used to come into our icy-cold bedrooms on wintry school days, reach under the covers and dress our feet with socks that she had warmed on the furnace grating downstairs. That's love! So were the meals that she spent hours preparing for us. Mom loved her children, their spouses, and their offspring. Somehow she remembered our favorite foods and prepared meals accordingly. She cooked big Thanksgiving dinners, then said to all assembled, "I've done my part; now you do yours!"

Mom taught me that unpleasant things eventually end – so there's no use worrying about them. I dreaded going uptown to the dentist, for example. Mom would say, "Tomorrow at this time your appointment will be over." That was true, of course, but the way she said it made it seem like dreading the event was indeed a waste of energy. All through the years this thought has given me comfort: "It will soon be over."

Mom taught me to wait, to anticipate future pleasures. What a valuable lesson! In my teenage years I wanted adventure! Mom was content to be at home. "Your adventure will begin as soon as you get to college," she said. So I waited – and it did! And Mom let me go. She let me go away to college, study what I wished, work and live away from home, then get married and move away for good. Mom never put pressure on us to come home to visit. We were always welcomed, though, whenever we could come.

Mom was there on the two most important days of my life: the day I was born and the day in 1953 when I had a life-changing experience with God. I was walking home from the shoe factory that summer day when the event occurred. I dashed home, ran to my bedroom to jot down the poem that was ringing in my head and then read it to Mom: "Nature proves there is a God. Look at the sky and the trees, feel the warm sun and the breeze: There *is* a God!" Poor Mom hardly knew what to think. Obviously something had happened to me, but she was not used to talking about spiritual matters. The best she could do was observe me to see what the outcome of this experience would be. And she did.

When I visited Mom in January of 2003, I took home with me her childhood Bible, knowing that she could no longer read it. There were three small slips of paper tucked in various places in the Bible. I was amazed to discover that one was in my handwriting: a bit of a letter that I had sent her with the reference Isaiah 41:10 written on it. The sentence on the other side showed that I wrote the letter in September, 1955, just when I started teaching school! Mom had cut the reference from the letter, looked it up in her Bible and then marked the place with the strip of paper. If she found comfort in these words, I am glad: *Fear thou not; for I am with thee; be not dismayed; for I am thy God; I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness.*

In the Lebanon Valley Brethren Home, Mom lived in four different sections. I think all of us were amazed at how well Mom adjusted to being in the Home, after telling us for years that she could never do that. Somehow, within herself, she found the capacity to adapt when she had to. I was with her when she had her first meal in Personal Care. There on the back of her chair was a large bib ("clothing protector"). Mom was horrified and did not put it on. The next day I was again with her for the noon meal. "I have accepted the bib," Mom said as she put it on. I was stunned! What a quick adjustment! What a lesson for me!

A few years ago Mom began to have trouble with her speech, a constant source of frustration for her. In Tranquil Terrace, in the summer of 2002, Mom looked at me sitting next to her and wished she could speak, wished her head were clearer. Then she twirled her right hand near

her right ear and said, "Oh, this ferhoodle!" She smiled and asked if I knew what "ferhoodle" meant. I had not heard that word for years! "Yes, it means all mixed up," I replied and then added, perhaps coining a word, "There will be no ferhoddlement in Heaven!" Mom's eyes filled with tears, as usual when Heaven or death were mentioned.

Mom's there now – thinking more clearly than she ever did on earth – not ferhoddled in the least! She can even smell the flowers now without sneezing, getting watery eyes or tight in the chest – beautiful thought! When I was a girl, Mom, with her allergy problems and frequent illnesses, appeared to be in fragile health. I thought she would die while still young, but she certainly fooled me! Yet all her years were just a drop in the bucket compared to eternity, where, together with all other believers, Mom, Dad and I will worship our Lord Jesus forever. Blessed hope! To you, the reader:

"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you will overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit" (Romans 15:13). Amen.

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