

ANECDOTES: FINDING MEANING IN MEMORIES

Around the fifteenth of December, 2005 I was on page 6 of a collection of anecdotes from my life, nearing completion, so happy with the way it was turning out, anticipating the joy my children would have reading the stories that would be part of their Christmas gift that year. Suddenly my fingers must have hit a combination of keys that started a new document in the center of a new page. All I saw as I glanced at my monitor was part of the word I had been typing, and that I was on page 1. Frantically I hit "Save," my fatal mistake, according to my daughter Marty. The computer, unable to read my mind, thought I wanted to save the brand new document in place of the old, and dutifully did just that. "A computer is just a machine," my son George said; "things go wrong with machines. Looks like an opportunity for personal growth, Mom."

I spent a couple days mourning my loss, rehashing my children's comments, not knowing what to do. My own teaching from the past rang in my ears: "Try to live on an even keel. The higher your expectations, the greater your chances for deep disappointment if things do not go as planned." How true. By the time I mailed out the Christmas packages of my writings, minus the centerpiece, I had made several decisions:

1. I would accept responsibility for my error, forgive myself (absolving the computer of blame!) and move on.
2. Lord willing, I would reconstruct the stories as best I could, with no time pressure.
3. I would make frequent copies of my works in progress to lessen my chances of losing documents in the future, realizing that anything can happen.
4. Because memories, the basis of Anecdotes, play such a large part in the lives of many of us as we age, I would turn the stories into an essay and add it to the series on ageing and dying that I started writing in Drum Hill. To go from anecdotes to essay, I would notice how the telling of my stories affected me and those who read them. Some of my findings I will add to the end of this essay, thanks to the suggestion of my friend Cliff, whose prodding piqued my interest.

Today is Monday, January 2, 2006. Four days ago I moved into the nursing home section at Sky View Health Care Center, four miles from Drum Hill. It is another new beginning; another adventure with God. It is also the day I will begin retyping the anecdotes for the pleasure of my family and, hopefully, for your pleasure as well. Here, now, are the anecdotes.

The last time my brother Bob, thirteen years younger than I, visited me at Drum Hill, I asked him what memories he had of the house where he spent the first six years of his life. Among other things, he remembered sitting at the dining room table filling a paper with markings that he was sure had some meaning. How I identified with him at the moment! A similar incident from my own preschool years stuck in my head after the visit was over, demanding to be written down. That's when I decided to start a paper entitled Anecdotes, a random collection of stories that would be there simply because I wanted to tell them.

In my young girlhood I sat at the same dining room table in our double house in Annville, PA busily "writing" when Grandma Hicks came over from next door. I tore the sheet from my tablet and gave it to her with a flourish. "Here, Grandma," I said. "I wrote you a letter!" The dear woman held the paper in her hands and moving her eyes across and down the page, began to read aloud: "Uh z-z-z-z-z. Uh z-z-z. Uh z-z-z-z. Uh z-z-z." Delight welled up inside me and spread all across my face. The markings really did mean something! Grandma could actually read my writing!

What amazes me is that, as I write this story, I become young Verna again and experience the emotions of the moment almost as intensely as I did originally. Getting the words on paper seems to release some of the happiness that I have carried around for years. Perhaps that's another reason I was so glad to get the stories written the first time: they relieved me of a lot of pent up joy. In any event, this was the first anecdote in the original version and it is first in this recreation.

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In April, 1966 we brought our newborn son Paul home from the hospital and gently laid him in the bassinet that had previously held his two brothers and two sisters. Paul, lying on his back and dressed in a long soft cotton nightgown, promptly fell asleep. Now it was time for the other children to come take a peek at the newest addition to our family.

MaryBeth and her friend Amy, both just turned four, came together and peered over the side of the bassinet in wonder. They left and obviously consulted with each other, for they were soon back with a question. Shyly, they let me know what was on their minds: "Does he have feet?" How happy I was to lift the nightgown and show them that Paul did indeed have feet!

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From March, 1960 until October, 1965, we lived in a rented house in Yorktown Heights, New York. Those were years of change for us and for the house, changes interesting enough that I think they would make a good children's story, a story written by someone else. I can only supply some of the elements.

When Leo and I moved into the house, we had two young boys: George, 18 months, and David, 6 months. By the time we left we had added two daughters, MaryBeth and Marty, and were expecting our fifth child. That's partly why we did not buy the house when the owners decided to sell: the three bedrooms and one bathroom were no longer sufficient for us. Besides that, the spring that served as the only source of water for the house had run dry during a drought the first two summers we lived there. The house we moved into in 1965 had four bedrooms, two full bathrooms and town water. It was a good choice.

The first two years we lived in Yorktown, our house was perched on a hill in the middle of a woods facing State Street, a dirt road that had formerly been a railroad bed. The closest paved street was Baldwin Road, slightly visible along with the few houses on it during the winter, completely hidden when the trees had leaves. We were really isolated!

In the spring of 1962 a massive project was begun to realign the Taconic State Parkway, just about a half mile from our house. The work and equipment involved in this dramatic change would play a major role in the story book I have in mind. Details would include the deafening sound of the Monday through Friday drilling that eventually removed a mountain, the stillness of the silence that came with the drilling stopped for the day, the shrill whistle at 4:00 that warned us all to go indoors and stand back from the windows, and then the blast, after which we could resume normal lives until the next day. Certainly the illegal blast that the company tried one day would be included!

The human interest part of the story would have to do with the happiness of George and David as they got to watch the road building equipment in action, taking the dirt from the mountain and using it to build up a new roadway in front of our property for Baldwin Road, which was also being re-aligned. Occasionally, when they were perhaps 5 and 4, the men would let the boys ride on the machines with them for a few minutes (with my permission, of course, and under my watchful eye). How they loved that! But the part of the story that I have been holding really close to my heart all these years has to do with a spot in our yard called The Hay.

In the summer of 1961, when our sons were almost 3 and 2, I began to let them play in the yard by themselves. Along one side of the house ran the driveway and close to the rear, our property was

bordered by a woods with a path running through it, leading to Baldwin Road. The front and other side were rimmed by several varieties of huge, extremely tall evergreens. Without a fence, the yard seemed pretty well delineated to me.

One day I looked out the window to check on my boys and could not see them. I ran outside and found them walking hand in hand down the path through the woods! "What are you doing here?" I asked. "We're just taking a walk," they said. I guided them back to the yard and made it clear that they were never to go into the woods again by themselves.

Later that same day the above scenario repeated itself, with one important difference: this time they were walking hand in hand down State Street! Again they said they were just taking a walk. When we got back to the yard, I told them that on this side of the house they were not to enter the driveway. I love to tell the true ending to this story, though it sounds like a fairy tale: "And George and David never again left the yard when they went outdoors to play."

That summer the boys located a spot in the yard that quickly became their favorite place to play. It was under a massive pine tree, with the lower branches high enough that they could stand up under it. For many years pine needles had accumulated on the ground leaving a coating that could easily be shoveled into buckets and toy dump trucks. They called this place The Hay. After breakfast they would say to each other, "Let's go to The Hay!" and off they would go, pails, shovels and trucks in hand. I could see the spot from the kitchen window and cherished the sight. I think I enjoyed The Hay almost as much as they did!

In the spring of 1962, George and David resumed their play in The Hay. Then in May a workman from the construction company appeared at our door with news. Because an exit ramp from the Parkway was going to be built along the edge of our property, many of the tall trees that bordered our yard were going to be cut down, including the pine that sheltered The Hay. I asked if work on the ramp was going to begin soon and he said no, cutting the trees was just stage one; actual construction would begin in a few months. Then I told him about The Hay and asked if that one tree could be spared as long as possible. He said yes! And so our boys had one more summer to play in The Hay. In September the tree was gone. The next summer the boys found other places to play. I am still grateful to the workman who spared that tree. Thank you!

By the time we left the house, it was nestled in a hollow facing Baldwin Road. State Street was gone, and so was the mountain. Lots of memories went with me, though. It feels good to have written down some of them.

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Once I sent two anecdotes to *Reader's Digest* thinking they would be good for a page entitled "Musically Speaking." Though I never heard from the Digest, I still think the stories are worthy of publication, perhaps in a music magazine. Here they are:

Cliff, our Sunday School Superintendent, enjoyed leading us in singing hymns and choruses each Sunday, though he could not read music at all. Symbols baffled Cliff, in particular D.S. The rest of us would find the corresponding sign and conclude the song while he stood in silence trying to figure out what we were doing. After one such occasion Cliff said, "I never know where to go when I see D.S. All I know is D.S. means Don't Stop!"

In the summer of 1968, as part of a cross-country trip from New York to Arizona, we spent a couple days with friends in Alabama. Our six-year-old daughter MaryBeth, whose musical training was well underway by then, was intrigued by the accent of our host family. "Mom," she said, "have you noticed that when people down here talk, they hold their notes a little longer?"

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I learned valuable lessons from my children through the years and, in fact, am still learning from them. Three examples come immediately to mind which I now recount with gratitude.

Marty was in second grade when she had to deliver sad news to me: the parents of her good friend Emily were getting a divorce. Among other things, she said, “Mom, people are different.” That sounds simple, but it really is profound. At that point my thinking needed to be stretched. Yes, people are complex; they do not react the same when life deals them blows. My solution to problems may not be the only right way to handle them. I needed to be less judgmental and more supportive and accepting. Marty, by her example and words, helped me to grow.

I was in the house trying to close a step ladder when Paul, then about twelve, came along. “Paul, do you know how to close this ladder?” I asked. “Take a look, Mom. How do you think it works?” he answered. I looked and, sure enough, was able to close it myself! In many situations through the years Paul’s advice, tucked away in my head, enabled me to figure out a mechanical puzzle. Some years ago I told Paul that he was a good teacher, reminding him of the incident I just told you. He laughed and said, “Do you know why I said that? Because I didn’t know how the ladder closed!” I told him that verified my assessment of him. A good teacher does not need to know all the answers, but must be able to motivate the students to discover the answers for themselves.

When MaryBeth was in her last years of high school, an opportunity came up for her to leave school early one afternoon and, with other students, take a bus to New York City to see a play. I was so surprised when she came home at the regular time that day! “What happened?” I asked. She said she and a friend, who was also going to the play, were together in the afternoon when MaryBeth suggested they head for the bus. The friend thought they had plenty of time and so they lingered. By the time they got out front, the bus had gone. MaryBeth did not seem to be upset at all, and then she told me why. “I figure, in the light of all eternity, it’s not going to matter if I see that play or not.” What a way to live! How much emotional stress we could be spared if we measured everything in the light of all eternity! Think about that, as I have ever since the day that MaryBeth missed the bus.

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It is interesting to see our children in their adulthood and remember the origins of some of their current activities and character traits. Were these traits and abilities born into them or nurtured into them? Probably some of both. In writing about my own childhood I have been surprised and delighted to discover that the person I am now was always there in age appropriate form. Similarly, the girl I used to be is still inside me, bringing me joy. I feel so whole when I think of things like that. And now I want to write something about each of my sons and daughters.

Besides moderating the Friday night worship services at Drum Hill and reading my sermons, George was also our musician, playing the keyboard and leading the singing. He has so much musical ability, and always did. When I was packing to move to Drum Hill, I found a paper on which I had written George’s first song. The whole scenario flooded back to my mind. George, less than three years old, was in the living room thinking of his toy dog which was in his bedroom upstairs. He decided to go get the dog, and as he climbed the stairs he repeatedly sang “Doggie’s upstairs, doggie’s upstairs – la, la, la, la.” For a tune he used an ascending scale with a simple ending. It sounded like this, each syllable and rest being one beat: “Do re mi fa so la ti do (rest) fa mi re do (rest) (rest) (rest).” It was a sign of things to come!

David recently sent us pictures of some of the carpentry projects he completed in the past year. He does beautiful work, both in his own house and in the houses of others. The finishing touches really caught my eye in the photos. How well I remember the origins of this hobby! David had a way of analyzing a problem and coming up with a solution, especially when it concerned use of space. He saw potential in the broom closet in our kitchen, for example, and soon it was a pantry with shelves of various heights,

more than adequate to hold our nonperishable foods. During his middle school and high school years David built at least four more storage units that we were still using when it was time to leave our house. David was always imaginative, quick and practical, working with whatever materials we had on hand. I'm so glad we gave him a chance to begin building and applaud the lengths to which he has gone with it.

Paul combined the skills of his brothers, though his musical gift definitely lies in the area of rhythm. Currently he plays a drum set for the worship service at his church. As a boy, Paul was often drumming on whatever was handy – tables and desks, for example. Leo had a snare drum from his own childhood that Paul used to further his ambitions. He really had a drum set in mind, so one day he turned the snare drum on its side, placed it on the floor, and then designed and built a foot pedal so he could play it as a bass drum. It worked! When he was about twelve, we bought him his first drum set. I was so impressed by how long he could keep a steady beat. Paul would vary the patterns of his drumming, but the beat remained constant. As a music teacher, I knew the value of that talent. As a mom, I never tired of the sound of percussion in the house.

Marty was less than two years old when she came downstairs one day wearing a skirt and blouse that I never would have combined, for both were patterned. I had to admit, though, that the effect was pleasing. Marty's inborn creativity, her way with color, texture and design, often enlarged my borders. Leo and I both remember an amazing calendar that she made for a school project when she was in second grade. She illustrated each month with poetry and a variety of craft supplies that made the pictures three dimensional as well as original. Marty uses her artistic gift in her work, and in the way she teaches, decorates the house, sets the table and dresses. In recent years she has been telling me about a crèche she envisioned using only an angel and animals. She came to Sky View last week with happy news: the assorted animals I had left in Drum Hill would be perfect for her project! I smile when I think of the mixture of ceramic and wooden animals I had. In her hands, it will work!

Last month MaryBeth sent us photographs, two of which showed her astride a horse. I had been expecting them! MaryBeth's interest in animals was never centered around ordinary pets like cats and dogs. I remember her coming home from elementary school one day and telling me that she had picked up a snake and moved it out of harm's way! Later her interest turned to turtles, including nursing injured ones back to health. Now she spends a week on Cape Cod each summer working with a project that locates, identifies and marks turtles for scientific purposes. In her youth she developed an interest in horses, so we gave her one riding lesson for her eleventh birthday. That only whetted MaryBeth's love of horses, though; she spent many hours in stables and rinks all through her high school years, and then it ended. Who would have guessed that many years later horse back riding would be prescribed as part of an educational package for her son Graham? The photos tell the rest of the story.

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All our children share some characteristics that bring me joy, the main one being that they are all people of faith. It is marvelous when your sons and daughters are also your brothers and sisters in Christ! I remember the seeds of faith we planted in them from the start: prayers, songs, Sunday School, worship services, the Bible verses taped to the wall and memorized, all the Bible and missionary stories we read aloud, the talks we had. By God's grace, the harvest has been rich! The Solid Rock Foundation on which my children have built their lives will hold throughout my illness and eventual death.

The other characteristic I want to mention is compassion. George, David, MaryBeth, Marty and Paul are all compassionate adults, an outgrowth of the caring children that they were. I could write many poignant anecdotes on this subject, but I prefer to keep them to myself. In the recesses of my mind I can see the Kwiatkowski boys and girls comforting the lonely, the homesick, the heart-broken; befriending the handicapped; welcoming the newcomers; visiting the elderly; listening to the confused; being a friend. God bless them! They certainly have my blessing. I am pleased with each one!

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I have so many fond memories of the year I was nine, mainly because that year was so different from the other years of my life. In 1942 Dad bought a farm in Hamlin, PA, about twenty miles from our house in Annville. We rented our house to friends and the four of us, including my brother (two-and-a-half years younger than I) lived on the farm for nearly eleven months, long enough to fill my soul and spirit with joy that remains until this day.

The farmhouse had a feature that I loved: an attic with a staircase and a complete floor! What a contrast to the attic in our house in Annville! The double houses on our street, including ours, had common attics, none of which had floors. The entrance to the attic was a hole cut into the ceiling of the front bedroom closet and covered with a heavy board lid. To get into our attic, we had to push aside Mom and Dad's clothes, set up and climb a step ladder, push aside the lid and hoist ourselves up the rest of the way until we were sitting on the edge of the floorless expanse itself. Dad had put some boards and cardboard around the opening so we could store our Christmas decorations and a few other things up there.

From our perch we could look across and see where Grandma had stored some items around her attic opening. We would not have dreamed of going over to Grandma's things, or even of walking around our own section because of the danger of having a foot slip and go through the plaster into the bedroom ceilings below. (At this writing, *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* is playing in our movie theaters. I think someone with more imagination than I could conceive of a whole different world that would be entered through the closet ceiling or by falling through the plaster!)

One day on the farm Mom asked my brother and me to come into the attic. Her sharp eyes had noticed some markings on the floor that made her think she had discovered a secret hiding place! "Wait here while I go get a screwdriver," she said. This was the biggest mystery I had ever experienced; it served as a platform from which I enjoyed mystery books such as the Nancy Drew and Hardy Boys series that I devoured in the years to come.

With baited breath we watched and waited as Mom pried expertly around the edges of the floor board. Finally it loosened and Mom lifted it up. She was right – it was a secret hiding place! Sometime in the past a box had been built underneath the floor for safekeeping and Mom, whom we used to say later had eyes that didn't miss much, had found it! The contents of the box, though, were both disappointing and puzzling: a few black walnuts and several new packages of fly paper. Fly papers were standard equipment in every house back then. They were long strips of sticky paper to which flies had a fatal attraction. They were packaged in small cardboard tubes; when opened and pulled to their full length, they were hung from ceilings, especially in kitchens to keep flies away from food.

Do you have in mind a solution to this mystery? Remember your solution must not only explain the presence of the box but also account for its contents. I thought of animals at times because of the nuts, but what would rodents want with fly papers? And how would animals know where the secret box was and how to get into it? Only now as I am writing the story down has a plausible explanation occurred to me. Before I reveal it to you, I must tell you about another structure that I loved on the farm.

Not far from the back door to our kitchen was a tree around which someone had built a bench and painted it white. Sometimes on hot summer days we would eat under that tree, bringing out chairs and using the bench as a table. This was quite a concession for Mom, who never could understand why people would cook food in the kitchen and then take it some place else to eat it. The rest of us were thoroughly enjoying ourselves, appreciating Mom's good cooking as well as being outdoors around that tree.

My explanation, which I will now reveal, comes partly from a deeper understanding that I have of my family and myself as a result of the stories I have been writing. That's why I couldn't come up with this solution sooner. I realize now that I have always been an adventure loving person with a romantic bent, one who found delight in things like benches around trees and hiding places. I also know there are many other people who share these characteristics. So here's what I imagine:

Previous owners of the farm had a little girl very much like me. Or perhaps it was a boy, or one of each. (I'm choosing to think it was the latter.) The father, who was handy with tools, built a bench around a tree in the back yard so his children could sit there and read after they had finished their chores. He also built them a tree house in the apple orchard out back, where they spent many happy hours. But where were they to play on rainy days? The attic would be a perfect place! To stir their imagination, the father built a box under a board in the floor. They could either use it for creative play or store their treasures in it. They did both. Then the children grew up and left their childhood pursuits behind them. When the family sold the farm, no one thought to empty the secret hiding place. The tree house (if there ever was one) was long gone, but the circular bench remained, sturdy as ever.

Now for the contents. There was a black walnut tree just down the lane from the house on our property. I remember playing with the walnuts, so I have no problem thinking other children did, too. As for the fly papers, perhaps the children hung up one of them when they played in the attic. Or, in their tubular packaging, they could have served as any number of things, limited only by the extent of their imaginations – logs for a cardboard fireplace, for example.

I mentioned the tree house because the apple orchard was a wonderful place to play. Our father, who was not handy with tools, made and hung a swing from a tree in the orchard. My brother and I spent a lot of time swinging; we climbed the apple trees, too. Perhaps the children who lived on the farm after we sold it also enjoyed the swing my dad made. I would like to think so.

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If I had named my brother in the above story, I would have called him Harold. That was his given name, but not the name by which he was known at the time. My brother was Sonny Ziegler until he was nearly twelve. I remember a sweet story that took place in front of our grandma's house in Annville. A salesman came down the sidewalk, patted my brother on the head and said, "Hello, Sonny." Wide-eyed, my preschool brother asked, "How did you know my name?" I just smiled.

In August, 1947 all that changed. We were moving from Pennsylvania to Sebring, Florida, a perfect time for my brother to lose his childhood name and assume his given one. He made it so clear that from now on we were to call him Harold. No one in Florida was ever to know that he used to be called Sonny. We respected his wishes the best we could.

Only once do I recall letting his nickname slip while we were in Florida. That incident so burned itself into my memory that I still remember –

- where we were: sitting on the ground behind our rented Florida cottage;
- who we were with: Owen and Otis, the thirteen-year-old twins who lived next door;
- what we were doing: playing mumblety-peg with Harold's pocket knife;
- the look on Harold's face when I carelessly betrayed his secret;
- how badly I felt and how relieved I was when no ill effects resulted from my indiscretion.

His plan worked. My brother was "Harold" in Florida and remained "Harold" when we returned to Annville after eight months.

Today is Monday, January 23, 2006. I just concluded the reconstructing of the anecdotes that I wrote last fall and then lost in a computer error. I was surprised to find that I really couldn't type anything else until my collection of stories was complete. During this time I lost the first two and a half pages of my rewrite in exactly the same way as I lost the originals, except I did not hit "Save"! Still, the article was gone. Fortunately, I had made copies of my work as I went along. Marty kindly put the anecdotes back on my computer and made a "Save as" copy as a precaution. By then I was so shaken that I turned the

essay into four separate parts, thinking I would rather cut and paste to get a master copy than to ask someone to type six or more pages again.

Now that I have written my anecdotes, I hope you will formulate yours, whether you write them or tell them. The Bible is full of stories and so are our lives. They all deserve to be known.

Today is Sunday, January 29, 2006. I have been at Sky View for one month already! And now I am ready to explore my anecdotes to find meaning tucked away in memories. What are the benefits of telling our life stories? One of my anecdotes has reminded me that people are different. While I may generalize at times, I will mainly write about how narrating my stories has benefitted me. I have told much about my life, not only in this essay but in many of my other writings as well. As I see it, the benefits are for you, the teller; for the readers or hearers; and for God's glory. As for my perspective, I am a 72-year-old woman with a disease that is crippling my body, now living in a nursing home. I know the stories surrounding the people of the Bible, many of whom are as real and alive to me as the people among whom I live. I have been a reader all my life and have enjoyed listening to the stories of others. And, of course, I write from the perspective of a person of faith, the only viewpoint I know.

– Personal stories help you to recall the presence of God in your life. It's wonderful to see in hindsight clear evidence that God was there all the time, molding, shaping you into the beautiful person he wanted you to be for God's glory and your pleasure. I feel like David who said God knew him when he was being formed in his mother's womb. As a young shepherd God was as real to him as when David was a warrior and later, a king. I can see consistency in my life, too, with my childhood being ordered by God for his purposes.

Even if I do not mention God in the incident I am telling, God is there. In the story about The Hay, for example, my thanks does not stop with the workman, but goes all the way to God, Creator of trees in the first place, who, looking down through the ages and seeing George and David playing under the old pine tree, splashed grace on their loving mother by sending a sympathetic workman to the house that day. Gratitude overwhelms me when I think of it. Praise God with me!

– Personal stories help you to know yourself, an important element for wholeness. One of my early writings that survived the purging of my childhood possessions is a diary that I kept in 1947, the year I turned fourteen. About ten years ago I annotated the diary, which really brought that year to my conscious memory. In thinking it over, I was amazed at how many of my current personality traits were clearly in place back then. And now in these anecdotes I certainly recognize the happy romantic nine year old on the farm, the preschool girl enjoying her grandmother and the mother delighting in her children. In every case the person is Verna, the same person who is writing this essay. I embrace the self knowledge that my stories have brought to me.

– Personal stories let people get to know the author. As believers, our lives are not our own, for we belong to the one who bought us with his blood on Calvary's cross. From the incidents God reveals about members of his faith family in the Bible, we should know that our lives are open books to God. Every incident, even the sinful ones we might like to hide, can be useful to others when told under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. I found when I was teaching Bible seminars that illustrations from my life really made an impact on class members. If letting people know me helps promote the Kingdom of God, I'm all for it.

Much of the Bible is biographical, but there are many autobiographical sections as well where personal stories are told. Ezekiel is one example. He says, *"In the thirtieth year, in the fourth month on the fifth day, while I was among the exiles by the Kebar River, the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God."* Ezekiel then goes on to describe all sorts of visions that he had, including one in which a hand with a scroll was stretched out toward him. A voice instructed him to eat the scroll. His response? *"So I ate it."* Instant obedience, no matter how strange the order may sound. How much that tells us about Ezekiel and his relationship with God! It also brings up another point:

– When connected with Bible stories, our anecdotes bring God to our time for others. God did not stop speaking to individuals when the Bible was completed. Like Ezekiel, I myself received clear instructions from a voice on three occasions: “Quit your job.”; “Flee!”; and “Go to Florida.” Each time I also obeyed. All were amazing experiences, tying my life to a number of Bible stories, including Peter’s miraculous escape from jail. There is risk involved in telling your personal experiences with God. I don’t know how Ezekiel, Isaiah or John felt about describing the visions they saw, but Paul was extremely reluctant to talk about his. The risk is that you may be accused of boasting or being filled with pride, both charges unfairly leveled by some at Paul. I know I am not unique in having gone through events that link me with Bible people. Let’s tell these stories that people may know that God interacts with his children today, that life with God is still an adventure.

– Personal stories affirm the value of others in your life. We do not live in isolation. Our stories almost always involve others, people important enough to have remained in our memories all these years. A wonderful case in point is Jean, my neighborhood friend and classmate in Annville. Jean and I paired up for the three legged race on Annville Picnic Day at Hershey Park. We tied our legs together and practiced in the days before the town picnic, and our work paid off. Two years in a row, probably when we were twelve and thirteen, we won first place in our age category in that race! Our paths seldom crossed after high school, but about ten years ago we got reacquainted and our friendship remains to this day. I got a note from Jean this week. She said in part: “Never forget our 3 legged races. We were the champs at Hershey Park on Annville Picnic Day – and you still are a champ to me.” We have been a part of each other’s personal stories for sixty years!

One more example expresses the bond between my brother Harold and me. Early in our teenage years we went with Dad to an airport near Annville to meet our Uncle Pete who was flying in his private plane to visit us. I noticed a series of letters and numbers on the side of the plane – NC46036 – and challenged Harold to see which of us could remember it the longest. From time to time for more than forty years we tested each other; both our memories held firm. Then in 1992 I sat by Harold’s hospital bed as he lay dying of cancer. His mind was clear, so we talked and reminisced until we came to something he did not remember. Suddenly he broke into a beautiful grin and said, “But there’s something I do remember!” Delight flashed on my face as I said, “What do you say we call it a tie?” We shook hands, both happy with the conclusion of the story that had brought us so much fun through the years.

– Personal stories can be stored in the mind and then retrieved in a time of need. Almost 35 years ago, I heard a seminar speaker tell about a red dress that she enjoyed wearing when she taught, a garment she felt the Lord had given her. One day the dress was damaged beyond repair. A revolutionary thought kept her from despair: Since everything she had came from the Lord, it was not her red dress that was damaged; it was the Lord’s red dress! Here at Sky View my clothing is washed by the facility’s laundry service. Already I have lost a couple shirts, possibly because they were delivered to the wrong room. I don’t know whether they will show up later or not, but this I know: I am not going to fret, no matter what happens to any of my clothing. An anecdote about a red dress helped me make that decision!

– Telling personal stories releases emotions stored up inside the teller to a place where others can share them. The emotion I chose to release in this set of anecdotes is joy. All these stories made me happy through the years that I was formulating them in my mind and brought me joy in writing them down. My purpose originally was to share my joy only with our children, hence the happy stories about them. Now I wonder if strangers reading my essay will find joy in them as well. I have read many anecdotes, articles and books based on true stories and I enjoy them even though I do not know the authors. I trust the same will happen with my stories as well.

Today is Thursday, February 9, 2006. The time has come for me to conclude this essay with a final thought. All the personal anecdotes that come out of our mouths or our computers or from our pens originate from within us. We have the power to choose which incidents we will consciously remember, mull over, tell and allow to shape our lives. We have power to choose whether we will be positive or

negative in our outlook and influence. Perhaps some of us are born with pessimistic or optimistic tendencies (if so, I am one of the latter), but all of us can be transformed by the renewing of our minds through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Paul tells us how to do this, sets himself up as an example and mentions a wonderful benefit of wholesome, positive thinking in his letter to the Philippians:

Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me – put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you (Philippians 4:8,9).

May we bless each other with our stories.

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