

## A PENNY FOR YOUR THOUGHTS – 11

APRIL – JUNE, 2008

**Monday, April 14, 2008.** The busiest half month I've had since moving into Sky View, as far as ministry and social appointments are concerned, is almost over. It has been a time of stretching and of facing the truth. I didn't know how much physical energy I had left to expend on events such as these, nor how emotionally draining they might be. So far my experiences have been joyful and surprising, though not without tension. Let me go over them one by one and see what insights might emerge.

– On **Thursday, April 3**, we had our regularly scheduled Sky View service called Scripture and Prayer with Verna and Friends. I had the service written a week early and my experienced, skilled team handled the details that day. All I had to do was sit there and enjoy, and that's what I did.

The next day something happened that brought a layer of unrest to my mind: the plug at the end of my feeding tube kept popping out, as if pushed by an agent within my stomach. This had happened once before, several months ago. Both times I suspected a build-up of gas in my digestive system, although there was no other evidence to confirm this suspicion. The first episode lasted two days; how long would this one last? Should I have the nurse tell the doctor? What if I have to go to the hospital, maybe for a new tube? (This one is now six months old.) Should I skip a nighttime feeding? Will the tape hold or should I have the tube put into a plastic bag to protect my clothing in case the tape gives way? On **Monday, April 7**, there were signs of healing, and by evening the problem was over! It lasted three days and did not interfere with my schedule.

As long as I am confessing the stressful thoughts that sometimes swirl around in my head, I may as well admit the one that is almost always there. I have very little bladder or bowel control left and this makes me want to stay here, near my aide and a supply of clean diapers. My loss of control might or might not be part of primary lateral sclerosis (PLS), but they work well together: the less I am able to get around, the less I want to go out.

There are a number of stresses connected with going on a trip away from here, but making the reservations isn't one of them. My friend Carolyn Burke made the arrangements with Paratransit for April 8 and Cliff Cullum worked with Sky View to secure an ambulette for April 13. But changing the routines that the aides have set up with their residents is also a challenge, one that involves me. The most drastic change was for April 8. The event started at 10 AM and Paratransit was due at 9. I usually get into my chair between 12 noon and 1:00, but that day I was asking to be ready at 8:30! I found it hard to relax that day as the clock ticked on with no sign of an aide. As it turned out, Carolyn and I got downstairs at 8:55. The bus was already there!

Fortunately, that problem would not come up on April 13, as that event was scheduled for 6 PM and the ambulette was due at 5. Then several days before that appointment, a recurring annoyance flared up: the bones that I sit on began to ache, making sitting uncomfortable. It got worse toward evening, but the long hours in bed gave relief, so each day had a fresh start. During the afternoon and evening I would type or socialize until I could no longer sit. Then I would tilt my chair way back until all the pressure was off my bottom. After I had rested a while, I would bring my chair to an upright position and continue working until I had to tilt again. How would I be on the 13th at 6 PM?

As you can see, I still have plenty of opportunities to trust in the Lord, and you have more specific ways that you can pray for me. Now it's time to get back to my schedule!

– On **Tuesday, April 8**, I was the “speaker” (with Cliff Cullum as my voice) for Praise Fellowship (PF), a group that rents a room on the second Tuesday of each month at the United Methodist Church in Shrub Oak (UMCSO) for their outreach program. It was to this group that I last spoke, several years ago, using my own waning voice. My friend Vallie Turner, one of the leaders, is in charge of finding speakers for PF. She also attends the worship services at Sky View, as she did our weekly services at Drum Hill. With a thorough knowledge of my style of teaching, Vallie asked if I would write a service for PF on any topic I wished, using as much time as I wanted (the meetings start at 10 AM and go to 12:30, the last part being a luncheon of shared food brought by the members). I was glad to work under such liberal guidelines! My faithful God impressed a fresh approach to a favorite topic on my mind, which I titled: My Mentor, the Apostle Paul.

PF heavily advertised the meeting, with good results. The meeting ran smoothly, obviously guided by the Holy Spirit. When we had finished our part, Vallie came to the podium and invited testimonials from the group. One person after another spoke up, many directly to me, thanking me for my involvement in their lives in the past. I was grateful that these dear ones were having the chance to say what they needed to say while I was living, rather than at my memorial service! As for me, I gathered up all those compliments and presented them to God as a beautiful bouquet of flowers. Then the Paratransit bus arrived and this event was over.

– On **Thursday, April 10**, the Activities Department here at Sky View held a Thank You buffet luncheon for their volunteers. Jenn, the director, had given me an invitation perhaps 10 days earlier, telling me to invite the family and friends who help with the services. Leo, Marty, Barbara, Carol, Frank and Cliff all said yes. Since the luncheon began at 11:00, I told the staff I wanted to be in my chair and ready to go at 10:45. At 11:00 Marty came into my room and found me sitting on the toilet, only partly dressed. “We’re all here,” she said. “I’ll tell them you’ll come as soon as you can.” I nodded and she left.

When I came off the elevator at 11:30, I found all six of my friends waiting for me! What’s more, a wonderful table in a secluded place had been reserved for us. Four other volunteers were already seated when the seven of us filled the empty spaces at the long table. I sat at one end of the table, flanked by Leo and Marty. How I enjoyed the next couple hours! I was delighted to discover that, after nearly three years on a feeding tube and without any feeling of deprivation, I could socialize with people while they were eating the foods I used to love. Jenn came around the tables giving each volunteer an envelope containing a note and a pin that indicated that we were volunteers. My note was personal, and I appreciated it. And that’s another thing I learned from this event: I never considered myself a volunteer, but I guess I am!

– On **Sunday, April 13**, I was back at UMCSO, this time for a function of the church: their monthly Praise and Worship service at 6:00. Cliff had prepared the entire service with minimal input from me. My job was to sit up front next to the pulpit, which had been moved down to floor level, and that I did. This meeting also had been highly advertised, and a much larger group gathered than usual. While many of these people were there to see me, they also came to praise and worship our Lord. What an hour we had together! Cliff had gathered a musical group to lead the singing, consisting of Cathy, Beverly and himself as singers with Rob at the piano. The result was wonderful! Cliff read much of the essay My Lord and My God, and Leo handled

the prayer section of the program. What we really had was a Sky View service enlarged to last an hour.

When the service was over, people came up front to talk with me and to express their appreciation. I was glad to see everybody. I had been told that some people wanted to see me but couldn't make themselves enter a nursing home. My outings on April 8 and 13 gave these folks the opportunities they were looking for. "People are different!" By the way, I did get through the service and the trips without having to tilt my chair! Went to bed early, though – tired, but happy.

It is now **Tuesday, April 22**, so the last of my 5 appointments is over. Let me tell you about the final one:

– On **Saturday, April 19**, the family of Eleanor Gorlitsky held a memorial service for her in the Main Dining Room. I wondered if I could sit through the service without disturbing everybody with loud crying. Gloria, from Activities, seated me next to Violet, Elie's roommate and friend, and then went on to moderate the meeting. Gloria was very emotional during her opening remarks, freely wiping tears from her eyes as she talked. Seeing this, I began to make some noises as I struggled to be quiet. Violet turned to me, as she has done before, and loudly asked, "Verna, are you all right?" At that, of course, many faces turned my way. I nodded "Yes" and actually stopped crying!

Gloria then handed the microphone to Elaine, a resident of the 4th floor, who read a memorial prayer that I wrote for a service at Drum Hill, and now had personalized for Elie. I had given the family through our staff a copy of the prayer and of the poem I had written in memory of Elie (see Penny 10), and had been told that they liked both. Near the end of the service, a friend of Elie's youngest daughter gave a wonderful reading of my poem. Now you see why I had to attend: Elie's family and I had to interact at least one time so everything could be said that needed to be said. While emotionally draining, the memorial was also emotionally satisfying.

**Thursday, May 1, 2008.** Here it is – May already! – and I have much more to say about what happened in April! I'll get to that, but first, take a look at the date. Yes, this is the first Thursday of the month, the day of our service at Sky View. It was so enjoyable, even humorous in parts. How quickly the months fly by! There are five weeks instead of just four between this service and the next. I appreciate the extra time to catch my breath.

Now back to April. Several other important things happened that month that I need to note:

– On **Wednesday, April 16** (his birthday), Pope Benedict the 16th came to the United States for a well-planned, exhaustive five-day visit. I don't remember being aware that he was coming, but I'm certainly glad he did. I was disappointed with how dirty our political scene had become; then, suddenly, into our midst came one whose message was intended to draw our minds and hearts higher: to God and to Jesus. I decided to watch as much of the visit as I could, so I would know first hand what this man and his message are all about. Never would I have dreamed what a treat was in store for me during those days! The pope was always serene; his presence was as refreshing to me as a drink of cold water would be to a parched throat.

Several years ago the Catholic Church in the United States was severely shaken by the exposure of a vast, long-standing sex scandal involving priests and the young people in their parishes. The Church had to pay huge sums of money that the courts ordered to be divided among the victims. Because the media were no longer carrying reports, I suppose I thought the

whole episode was over. The pope knew better; complete healing required his presence on our soil, as well as healing words. Pope Benedict spoke of the scandal openly, immediately, and in a variety of settings. But that was not the only reason for his visit. He also challenged thousands of young people to commit themselves to Jesus, and did the same to the general population that filled Yankee Stadium for mass one day.

With the pope's visit coming so close to my own outings, I received some answers to questions that have been floating around in my head: (1) On a MUCH smaller scale, I now realize that I must make the effort to appear in person when my presence would bring healing or refreshing. (2) I must not be afraid to confront or to be confronted. It's much better to handle a problem near its genesis than to ignore it until it's out of control. (3) I want more than ever to honor my Lord Jesus with my life and with my words. "Take the world, but give me Jesus."

– On **Friday, April 18**, I had my 75th birthday! The exclamation point has a couple meanings: (1) Both of my grandmothers died at age 81; that was considered very old at the time. I never expected to live that long, and now I am only six years away! (2) When I was diagnosed with PLS, I certainly thought I would die before now. My illness is definitely progressing. I made a startling discovery on **Wednesday, April 30**, for example. That afternoon there was a party to celebrate the residents who had birthdays in April. This time a new feature was added to the routine, one that I really thought was clever. Two staff members went from one celebrant to another, carrying with them a pack of multicolor, spiral birthday candles and a lighter. As they stood before each of us in turn, they lit one candle and had us blow it out. When my turn came, I blew, but nothing happened! "Do you need help?" Jenn asked. "Yes," I nodded. Jenn blew, and the flame went out.

I had known that I had trouble inhaling. When I want to take a really deep breath, I make myself yawn by picturing someone else yawning. That I can do very well! In 2005, when I was still living in Drum Hill, my neurologist ordered an inhaler for me. I thought it was because of my chronic bronchitis, but maybe the doctor knew something about PLS that I don't know. At Sky View the style of my inhaler was changed. Now I get two puffs three times a day from what nurses call a puffer. Where is this leading? Is the candle incident connected with the fact that for several years it has been difficult for me to blow my nose? Both involve exhaling.

– From **April 23 - 29**, Andrea, my reflexologist, loaned me the movie "Door to Door," based on the true story of Bill Porter. Oh, how I enjoyed that movie! Before Andrea picked it up, I had watched it four times. I identified with Bill, a man who was injured at birth, leaving him with cerebral palsy, which is a condition, not a disease. When Bill got a job as a door to door salesman with the Watkins company, he got all dressed up in the house he shared with his mother, then stood in front of a mirror to practice smiling. He quickly turned away, though, because his smile was definitely crooked. Mine is, too; I knew exactly how he felt. I also noticed the discrete way he wiped the corner of his mouth with a folded handkerchief. I drool, too, but I am not discrete or skilled in handling the problem. Bill's mother did a fine job of teaching her son how to live with his physical handicaps. She taught him, for one thing, not to be ashamed. What a valuable lesson! I am still pondering that one, as well as other things from my very busy month of April. But now, on with May!

**Monday, May 5, 2008.** Here at Sky View we are warned not to get too attached to our aides and nurses, because they are always subject to re-assignment or they leave for various reasons. I wonder if the aides and nurses are given the same warning: don't get too attached to the residents, because they are fragile; we don't want their deaths to affect you too much. All this is a preamble for another entry about the male aide I had regularly during my first year at

Sky View. He left here in January, 2007 to make his second job his only job, that is, night aide at a nearby veterans' hospital. I told you he surprised me with a visit a couple months later. As he was leaving, he told me he was going to visit Elie. After that, he continued to visit approximately every two months, always going from me to Elie.

When she died, the first person I thought of was the aide who was so attached to her. I found out about about a week later that he had been told and he did grieve. I wondered if he would be able to come here after Elie's death. I got my answer this morning when he entered my room with a big smile on his face. We talked about Elie, and I gave him a copy of the poem I wrote about her. When he was leaving my room he mentioned three more of his Sky View residents that he was going to visit! After 16 months we are still on his heart; no wonder we loved being on his schedule!

**Sunday, May 11, 2008.** Mother's Day. Sky View gave each female resident a beautiful wrist corsage today and held a gala celebration downstairs. It was easy for me to count my blessings in connection with this day. Not only do I have five wonderful sons and daughters, but I am mother-in-law to five fine men and women and grandmother to 11 great children, three of whom are now adults! In the other direction, I have fond memories of my mother and both my grandmothers.

How well I remember my first Mother's Day as a mom! We were living in Huntsville, Alabama with our nine-month-old son, George. On that Sunday George came down with his first illness, which included fever. We called our pediatrician who said he'd meet us at his office. While he made his examination, the doctor turned to me and asked, "Do you feel like a mother today?" I said I did.

**Tuesday, May 13, 2008.** A couple weeks ago I was sitting on my front porch (the hallway in front of my door) talking with a friend when Nadine came by and said, "My birthday is June 1st, and I want a poem from you." I imagine she was joking, but I tucked the thought away in my head for later. Very early this morning I began formulating a poem in my mind, and before I got up, it was finished! I wrote it down, lest I forget, and now I'll print it on pretty paper and wait for the right time to give it to her.

For June 1, 2008

Nadine,  
Nadine –  
As fine a woman as I have seen.  
Beautiful on the outside,  
Beautiful on the inside –  
On my page you'd be a queen!

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

Happy birthday, Nadine!  
Love, Verna. 413.

**Thursday, May 22, 2008.** I feel like last night's meal was served to me on a sparkling clean plate! Yes, I got a new feeding tube yesterday. My old one, which had begun to leak, was found to have a hole near the intake valves. It had served me well for over seven months; I didn't mind the thought of having it changed. And so yesterday afternoon I found myself sitting in my chair by appointment in the ER waiting room at Phelps Memorial Hospital. Marty met me at the hospital and handled all the paper work. Not long after that, Dr. Martin was by my side and soon there we were: the three of us, in an ER office!

I had wanted to be transferred to a bed so I could lie flat for the procedure; instead, my chair, reclined as far as possible, became my operating table! Dr. Martin ran into a problem when my old tube resisted being withdrawn. I was impressed with how skillfully and compassionately the doctor worked through the problem. There was pain involved. I don't mind telling you that I really clung to the hand of God that I knew was holding mine (Isaiah 41:13). I felt sorry that Marty had to witness the whole scene, though I appreciated the prayers I knew she was praying. (Later on, Marty said she was actually glad to be in the room with me.)

And then it was done; the old tube was out and the new one was in place. The pain was over and we were all relieved. How long will this one last? We'll see!

**Monday, May 26, 2008.** This is the day we celebrate Memorial Day this year – the last Monday in May. In the past few years this holiday has taken on new meaning for me; it means the Dyers are in town! MaryBeth and her sons John and Graham came without Charles, as he was not feeling well. Among other things, I showed Nadine's poem to MaryBeth. Then this morning, after I heard by her voice that Nadine was working today, a wonderful idea came to mind. As soon as I could, I delivered a note to Nadine inviting her to come to my room after my family arrived. How wonderful it was to be able to introduce the two women and watch them embrace! Then I gave Nadine a copy of the May 13 entry from this essay. As she finished reading, MaryBeth handed her the poem printed on a page depicting a beautiful blue sky with puffy white clouds. So now Nadine has her gift, which she certainly appreciates.

**Friday, June 6, 2008.** We were delighted to have a resident of Drum Hill at our service yesterday. Aetna, who regularly attended our weekly services in Drum Hill, had a stroke and is here for an extended period of rehabilitation. Barbara, one of the people who helps me with the services, has known Aetna for years; for a while, they attended the same church. I met Barbara when I attended a Bible study she was teaching at Drum Hill. Now she visits me weekly and together we watch a lecture from a video taped series on the Old Testament. On Monday of this week Barbara visited Aetna before she came to me, and told her about the service. The next day I went to Aetna's room on the 5th floor where I was warmly greeted, just as I had always been at Drum Hill. Her smile, that lights up her whole face, and her positive attitude were as intact here as they had been there. She had no quarrel with God concerning the way her life was turning out! And then yesterday there she was, being greeted by Janet, George, Leo and Cliff, all of whom she knew from Drum Hill. I marveled as once again I saw the Master Weaver at work. Beautiful!

**Sunday, June 8, 2008.** Again several things have converged in my mind, bringing me thoughts that I want to record, namely: the deaths of my sister-in-law's father and Leo's brother Joe; the DVD of The Sound of Music (a recent gift from George and Janet); and a very generous gift that Joe gave us 50 years ago. My sister-in-law is Esther, wife of my brother Bob. At one time both of her parents and both of ours lived in the Lebanon Valley Brethren Home in Palmyra, PA. Her father, the last of the 4 to survive, died in March. In a subsequent email, Esther introduced me

to a phrase I want to remember and use as long as I can: “tender time.” She wrote, “A pastor from our Association referred to this time after Dad’s death as a “tender time” and that struck me as being an accurate term. I feel a sort of sadness and tenderness like when a muscle is tender but not really painful.” I used that phrase when I wrote to Bob and Esther concerning her father’s death.

Then in April, just before his 81st birthday, Leo’s brother died. Joe had been ill for a long time, so his death was no surprise. That doesn’t mean, however, that there was no sorrow involved. In a letter to his children I spoke of their tender time, hoping the thought would bring them comfort. Then I sifted back through my memories to see how I would best remember Joe, and was struck by his generosity. In the same letter I mentioned several instances where we were the beneficiaries of their father’s generosity.

Lately an unusual gift that I hadn’t thought about for years has reinstated itself in my conscious mind, perhaps stimulated by watching *The Sound of Music*, coupled with Joe’s death. Remember the part in the movie where Maria makes play clothes for the children out of the sturdy draperies that were going to be replaced? My story has similar elements in it, but in the reverse. Leo and I were married in 1957 and moved to Huntsville, Alabama. On one of our first trips North, we stopped in New Jersey to see Joe and his family. During the visit, Leo’s brother took us to his place of business, a company that manufactured men’s pants and shirts. Knowing that I could sew\*, Joe asked if we would like to have some fabric samples that the company no longer needed. We were thrilled! The pieces were long, wide, and sturdy, with most of it being as heavy as denim. As soon as we could, Leo and I added up the yardage and found that Joe had given us more than 110 yards of fabric, a generous gift indeed!

Back in Huntsville, we began to use the fabric by making some maternity skirts for my wardrobe. Then we moved from a furnished apartment to an unfurnished house. Immediately we put more of our fabric to use by making draperies for the living room from the material that had been meant for clothing, thus the imagery referred to above. I deliberately said “we” used the material because Leo often measured and cut out the garments and household items I made, and he certainly showed an interest in all the finished products. Some other things I remember making through the years with this material were a number of garments, especially pants, which all three of our sons wore; a vest for Leo; and several blankets. Precious memories!

\*How did Joe know that I could sew? Perhaps it had to do with the time I first met Leo’s family, in the summer of 1956. My first year of teaching school had ended and I was back home with my parents in Annville, PA. In August I would be going to Tucson, AZ for my second year of school teaching. To help me prepare for the trip, I made myself a new dress out of red and white checked fabric. I told Leo that I would be wearing that dress when I went to meet his family for the first time, and apparently Leo passed on the news. He had also prepared me, especially for meeting his grandmother. “She only speaks Polish,” he said, and I tucked the information into my brain. When the time came that I was standing before this dear old lady, she took hold of my skirt and said, “Nice dress!” Filtered through the information in my head, I assumed she had spoken Polish words, and looked around for a translation. When I was told that she had worked so hard on those English words to make me feel at ease, I was crushed to think I had spoiled her generous surprise. We became friends, though, looking back, I don’t think she ever spoke another English word to me.

Then, too, I made my wedding dress, and the family certainly knew that. Leo’s sister Frances made the veil I wore on my wedding day. I didn’t take me long to discover that Leo’s whole family was generous!

**Saturday, June 21, 2008.** A week ago I had a mostly recreational outing at the Jefferson Valley Mall. I hadn't had a chance to really talk with Carolyn for a while; I thought the mall would be a fine place for in-depth conversation – and it was! It felt good to be around so many people, and even better when one of them turned out to be my friend Beth, who stopped to chat. I did have to let go of a favorite activity from the past, though. I had hoped to browse through row after row of used DVDs, preferably also on sale, with the goal of adding a few to my collection. We did find hundreds of such DVDs, but they were in bins on tables. From my seated position, I could not see them. In the same store we found many more used DVD movies, filed in alphabetical order. I let Carolyn look through them for me, heeding her recommendations. Finally I selected four: three of which we paid for and one which was free with the purchase of three.

**Friday, July 11, 2008.** Why am I closing Penny 11 now, rather than at the end of June? Two things happened as the month was ending: (1) It took me longer than I had expected to write the sermon for the July service and (2) on Monday, June 30 I began to feel ill. July 1 was no different, so I worked really hard to finish the sermon, as Cliff was coming to get it on Wednesday. When he came, he found me sick in bed with diarrhea. I ended up spending three days in bed, and yes, I missed the service, which went on well without me. Trivia: I wonder if “sick-in-bed” as a phrase is commonly used in our country or if it is a Pennsylvania Dutch term from my childhood that resurfaced for this story??

**Sunday, July 26, 2008.** When I started writing the above entry, I was telling people I was 95% well. Little did I know that on the 12th I would start vomiting, and that by evening I would be admitted into the hospital for a five-day stay! Since my purpose is to close this essay, I will just say that I feel fine now, MUCH better than before I became ill. Lord willing, I'll see you in Penny 12!