

A PENNY FOR YOUR THOUGHTS – 16

JULY – SEPTEMBER, 2009

Friday, July 10, 2009. With these keystrokes, the 16th edition of the saga of my life with God as a resident at Sky View nursing home has begun. Imagine that! Before I started writing the Penny essays, I rarely had kept a diary or journal more than 8 or 9 months, and most were far shorter than that. But now I have an inner urgency that keeps me writing. And so, to all who are reading this, welcome to Penny 16!

Well, July 1 came and went, and nothing unusual happened. I told you at the end of Penny 15 that the aides were going to rotate schedules every month, starting July 1. Before this, we often had the same aides for years. I was among those who were quite comfortable with our routines. Diane, our 4th floor social worker, as well as director of that department, had carefully explained to us in mid-June the reasoning behind the new plan. At this week's meeting, Diane informed us the plans had been both changed and postponed. She wasn't even sure if they would EVER be put into effect. All this uncertainty brought to mind the wisdom of what Jesus said in Matthew 6:34 – *Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself.* I try to live by this "one day at a time" admonition; must try harder!

Tuesday, July 14, 2009. I am amazed at how much I enjoy listening to books on CDs! Previously, I had thought of audio books only as a wonderful resource for those with impaired vision. Now I know they are also great for people like me, whose hands no longer have the strength or dexterity to hold and turn the pages of a book. Andrea, my reflexologist, who knows well my taste in books and movies, keeps me supplied with recommendations, and Leo, my husband, gladly orders them for me from our local library system. In the past couple months I have "read" 3 audio books from a long series by Alexander McCall Smith: The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency, Tears of the Giraffe, and Morality for Beautiful Girls. Currently I am reading Wish You Well by David Baldacci.

There are many ways I keep myself mentally stimulated. I continue to listen to The Bible Experience on CDs. My friend Barbara Devir, who visits me weekly, and I are part way through our second course of lectures on theology and the Bible on DVDs. We also watch movies with redemptive themes and then discuss them. Now she is reading to me the book The Diving Bell and the Butterfly by Jean-Dominique Baudy. The author was far more handicapped physically than I am, yet he wrote this book letter by letter with the blink of one eye, and with the help of friends, of course. What an inspiration for me!

Leo reads to me every time he visits. Other people bring in newspaper or magazine articles or passages from books to share with me. Some visitors bring with them topics they want to discuss, usually relating to the Bible. How I enjoy those conversations! And, in addition, I learn from television. Yes, there are some good, worthwhile programs on TV, which also brings me local, national, and world news. I am so blessed!

Thursday, July 16, 2009. Today my custom-made electric reclining wheelchair was taken away for repairs. It had been giving me trouble for over 2 weeks, keeping me close to my room. Until I get it back, I will be driving a loaner chair that also reclines. How different this chair is from mine! It will take me a while to get used to it. My main concern, whether the chair would fit under my desk so I could type, was answered in the negative the first time I drove up to the computer. The chair arms needed to be lowered, not only so I could type, but also for the comfort of my own arms.

At times like these I am so glad to be living in a place that has resources I may use. I asked the nurse to contact my social worker, and soon Diane was sitting in my room. She heard the story, observed the problem, and suggested a solution. That's her job, and she does it well! "Let's go down to the physical therapy department," she said. "I think they can fix it. If not, we'll try maintenance." (I always like it when there's a back-up plan!) And so Diane served a dual role for me in the next few minutes: she was my escort for the first elevator ride and trip I had in the loaner chair and she served as my voice in PT.

While Steve was gathering his tools, for indeed he could help me, I glanced at a sign on the wall directly in front of the place where I had parked my chair, and saw this:

PARKING FOR
FROGS ONLY

ALL OTHERS
WILL BE TOAD

The play on words struck me as so funny that I began to laugh my extremely loud, uncontrollable PLS laugh. Diane laughed with me after I pointed to the sign, while at the far end of the long room questioning faces turned and stared at me. As we were leaving, I heard Diane say to one of the workers, "She has primary lateral sclerosis." I'm sure she went on to explain that my odd, startling laughter is caused by the PLS at work in my brain, for that's another part of her job: to know her residents. She excels in this area also!

This journal entry, written for a number of reasons, seems to have turned into a note of appreciation for Sky View and its staff, especially Diane. Well, that's fine with me. God has splashed us with his grace, his undeserved, unearned favor. Shouldn't we respond by splashing each other with blessings, thanks, and praise? I think so!

Saturday, August 1, 2009. August already! I will try to catch up on a few things from July before moving on. First of all, I am still using the loaner chair. Marty says my own chair may be returned this coming week. I miss it, especially the headrest, and the way the chair fits under my desk. For now, I'll look at this as another chance to practice waiting patiently.

We have regular fire drills here at Sky View, but this past week we had something different: a real fire! It wasn't bad, and no one was hurt, but it did make us think. When a resident on the east wing of the 4th floor, which is where I live, turned on her air conditioning unit, flames shot out of it, prompting a call to the fire department. Instead of allowing us to remain in our rooms with our doors closed, all 22 of us in the east wing had to gather in the 4th floor day room. I enjoyed being with my neighbors in this "crisis" situation, watching and listening as they interacted with each other and with staff.

For some reason, waiting in the day room for the "all clear" signal reminded me of the fire drills we had when I was in college, especially the ones that came in the middle of the night. At the sound of the alarm, we would hop out of bed, hastily don our bathrobes and slippers, hurry down the long flights of stairs, and huddle in places deemed to be safe. The shared experience seemed to draw us together, making us a community as well as individuals; it was the same at Sky View.

In the day room, the resident I communicated with the most was Marilyn, who had been wheeled there in her recliner. I parked my chair facing hers so we could be together, as well as part of the group. Marilyn appears to be about my age, maybe younger, and she is a beautiful woman. Although she doesn't know this, I consider her to be a former college classmate of mine. When she first came to our floor, Marilyn was sitting more upright and could read my Lightwriter screen. Also she could speak more clearly at the time than she does now. From her recliner, she can no longer see what I

type, and pressing the audio button doesn't really help. We are two women with sharp minds who would love to sit and chat, but can't. And so we smile! Sometimes our smiles simply mean, "I'm glad to see you!" But other times, as in the day room, our smiles speak volumes. They say, "I know what you are thinking (or trying to say), and I agree" or "I heard that too. Funny, wasn't it?" and many other such things. "Knowing smiles" would be a good name for them.

I said the incident made us think. I'm sure I was not the only one who wondered how we would be evacuated if a blaze ever went through the building and the elevators were off limits. Many of us could not help ourselves at all. Then I thought of two things:

1. The professionals would try to rescue US, not our chairs and other equipment. This would make the task somewhat easier.
2. This is completely out of my hands. It is the responsibility of others to plan for our safety. My job is not to worry about it!

Wednesday, August 5, 2009. Still thinking about the end of July. I had two visits from out-of-state relatives during that time. First, my brother Bob came by train from Maryland to spend 1 hour with me. Actually, that's a bit misleading. He really had to attend a brief business meeting in Manhattan, and felt that if he combined that with a visit with me before returning home, he could consider it more of a day well spent than without the visit. The train ride from Grand Central to Croton-on-Hudson, where Sky View is located, is about an hour in length. Bob and I were both glad he took it!

Then our son David, his wife Dana, their 16-year-old daughter Amy, and her friend Cara drove up from North Carolina to spend a few days in the area. I had two extended visits with them during their stay and enjoyed them both. When Dana and I had time alone, I realized afresh how much I love the spouses of our sons and daughters! Ed Ford, Charles Dyer, and Janet, Dana, and Marita Kwiatkowski are my sons- and daughters-in-LOVE, rather than just in-LAW!

David said something that gave me a special thrill, for he was expressing exactly my own philosophy. He said, "I realize that there are many things I used to do that I realize I will never do again, AND THAT'S OKAY." He gave 2 examples: bicycling and playing the violin. He was excellent at both. When he graduated from college in 1981, he bicycled across the whole country! He took his first violin lesson at the age of 5, and played in his high school orchestra, as well as in our family musical group. David said he had thought of taking up his violin again, but decided against it, saying again: AND THAT'S OKAY.

The whole subject resonates so deeply with me. It means that my son is facing the ageing process well, and that's a good thing, for later this month David will be 50! He's living in the present, facing the future, while acknowledging and enjoying, on occasion, memories of past activities – without trying to bring them into the present. There is a time for everything, including a time for letting go of things that used to bring you pleasure. What a difference there is if this is done willingly rather than regretfully! As for me, I will couple the title of a children's book with David's comment as follows:

THAT WAS THEN; THIS IS NOW – AND THAT'S OKAY!

Monday, August 17, 2009. Our August service was a little different from the others because Cliff was on vacation. I am so thankful that my team of Friends has plenty of depth to handle situations like this! I decided to have Leo moderate the service this time and split the sermon between Leo and Frank. With Earl at the piano, Harvey helping, and George and Janet distributing the handout sheets that Cliff had prepared before he went away, all went very well! I must also acknowledge the activities staff for gathering the residents; very few of us can get there without help.

Part of our emphasis in this service was that of making a lifelong decision to follow Jesus and then carrying it through, with no turning back. At this point, Leo used his access to the microphone to give an unscripted tribute to me and my commitment to Christ during the more than 54 years that he has known me. Now I want to turn the tables and pay tribute to him.

I am truly impressed with and grateful for the way Leo is handling my illness and my living in a nursing home. God's grace is operating in his life, too! NEVER have I heard him utter one word of complaint or of disappointment with God over how things turned out for us! And he is not just stoic about the situation; his facial expression and his ready smile come from a settled peace within. The staff here likes him. When anyone says to him "How are you?" he answers, "I am cheerful, grateful, happy, and content – and one day closer to Heaven!" That always brings a smile! I know he is having a good influence on some believers who marvel at his attitude.

This evening Jill, a nurse who occasionally works on our floor, came into my room and said, "It's been a long time! Remember me?" Of course I remembered Jill! She is a burst of sunshine; her smile lights up her whole face! "How's Leo?" she asked. After I indicated that he was fine, she continued, "PLEASE tell him I said hello. He was so kind to recommend books for my daughters." And that's another thing about Leo: he really enjoys helping people!

Tuesday, August 18, 2009. Barbara visited me today, and we completed our project involving The Diving Bell and the Butterfly. After she finished reading the book to me, we watched the movie together in 3 installments. Both of us were glad we had read the book before seeing the film. I am amazed at the technical skill used in producing this movie, which has the same name as the book. We really got to view Jean-Dominique Baudy's world through his one good eye, and to hear what he was thinking. His story would be a good lead-in for a discussion on end of life issues or on the value of people in general, and handicapped people in particular. I know my life has been enriched because Jean-Dominique lived long enough after his stroke to write his book, one blink at a time!

Flashback! There I am, about 15 years old, sitting on the cellar steps of our home on S. Lancaster Street in Annville, Pennsylvania, pondering the implications of a new thought that had been running around in my mind lately. I was realizing that inside my body lived someone named Verna Ziegler, a person only I could truly know. This inner personhood, unique to me, would be with me as long as I lived. Others could watch from the outside what was happening to me, but only I could watch from the inside. There was a sense of aloneness in my thoughts, but then it was not unusual for me to feel "different," as if I didn't quite fit. Maybe that's what brought me to the cellar steps in the first place; maybe NOBODY quite fits! It had to be true that everyone else also had a person living inside them, a unique person that I could never fully know, one who answered to their name. I didn't know it then, but what I had discovered was the soul, and the thought overwhelmed me!

Since that time I have always been aware of my soul, of the person who lives inside me. I often carry on conversations with myself, talks that no human can hear. I imagine most people talk to themselves, that is, their souls, at times. I KNOW King David did that, because in Psalm 103 he records, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, one such conversation. Here it is. Notice that David is speaking to his soul, which he also called "all my inmost being":

Praise the Lord, O my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name. Praise the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits – who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion, who satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.

The reason we know David so well is that he chose to reveal his inner self in writings that have survived to this day. Among other things, David lets us know that on this occasion he felt clean, content, healthy, and young, and he gave God the glory for all these happy feelings. To his credit, he also lets

us see the agony of his soul when he was suffering for his sins, when he felt stuck in the pit and abandoned by God.

Likewise, Jean-Dominique decided to let the whole world know him by writing his book. It is so clear to see from reading this volume that, inwardly, he really was free as a butterfly, while strictly limited by his body, as if he were confined to a diving bell. As I'm often reminded here at Sky View, the condition of the body and the condition of the soul don't always match. Everybody has value and deserves to be heard, by whatever means they can communicate, for as long as they live.

Friday, August 21, 2009. This morning I got my powerchair back from the repair shop! I was still in bed when the shop employee knocked on my door and came in, operating the chair by its hand controls. "This thing is fast!" he said, as he brought it to a stop. I filed the information away in my head for later, and returned to the present. Through a series of grunts and gestures, I got him to take the pillow and pad off the loaner chair and put them on my own chair. He asked if I could sign a paper about the transfer. When I shook my head no, he put a pen in my left hand and with his own hand, moved mine until I had made a mark that he said would serve as my signature. And then he was gone!

A couple hours later, I was dressed and seated in the newly-renovated chair, and it felt good. The employee was right about the speed, however. Even at the lowest setting on the controls, the chair is fast! Hopefully, next week the original salesman will come and adjust the speeds for me. Meanwhile, I'll stay close to my room and practice driving safely.

Thursday, August 27, 2009. Yesterday the speed on my chair was adjusted so that it's safe for me to drive now. The first thing I did was go to the August birthday party that was taking place on the first floor. It felt so good to be mingling with the residents and staff again! For six weeks I drove among others only when necessary. Later in the afternoon Leo came into my room and asked if I had been to the lobby lately. When I shook my head he said, "Come on. Go down with me." I was glad to be able to accept his invitation.

What a marvelous sight awaited me in the lobby! Sky View had set up a grouping of four sculptures in such a way as to suggest a summer day in the park in the 1930s or early 40s. One was simply of a tree and another was of a public water fountain, with water actually flowing from its spout. A beautiful dog stood on its hind legs lapping at the water! These two were in the center of the grouping. To the left was a girl jumping rope, the store-bought kind with handles, not just a piece of old washline. To the right were two boys playing leap frog. What happy memories those sculptures stirred up! The child Verna, who also played those games, is still very much alive within me.

Friday, August 28, 2009. This past week I finished listening to the entire Bible on CDs, thanks to The Bible Experience. It took me 8 months to hear all of it, which is much faster than I ever read the whole Bible before. I am a firm believer in knowing both testaments, for they really do form one story. Now I will listen to some of my favorite sections again: Psalms, Isaiah, and the epistles, for example. Also, I finished September's service this past week. Now I have time to work on a special project for my brother. In October, Bob and his wife Esther will be celebrating their 40th wedding anniversary in Baltimore, Maryland. Three of our children, George, David and Marty, plan to attend, along with their spouses. Bob and Esther have requested that people bring family history stories with them. Obviously, I can't go – and that's okay! – but I plan to send along an assortment of pictures and stories, most of which I will just have to gather, and a few that I will write, Lord willing. Should be fun!

Saturday, September 5, 2009. When the nurse entered my room this morning she said, “I keep thinking today is Sunday. I had expected to hear a sermon on TV when I came into your room.” I smiled, and since I still was in bed without my Lightwriter, I only could wish I could tell her that the time for listening to TV sermons at Sky View appears to be over, at least for now. In August Sky View switched cable TV providers, and this company does not carry the channel I used to watch on Sunday mornings. At first we were promised a channel called Gospel. I looked forward to seeing what that channel had to offer, but it was withdrawn before I had a chance to do so. I really enjoyed listening to James Merritt and David Jeremiah each week, a practice I called “going to church.” But again: That was then, and this is now. I questioned the staff about the Gospel channel, and they acknowledged the change without promising to have it restored. I know the Lord will find other ways to speak with me Sunday mornings. Meanwhile, I’m glad I had access to the teaching of James and David as long as I did, and that others were blessed by them as I listened and learned. Both are gifted Bible teachers.

Two days ago we had our September service, which Leo described as quite spirited. That it was! Several people in the congregation that day responded verbally to what was being said, and even more clapped their hands on some of the songs, especially This Little Light of Mine. Earl Brown’s rousing gospel style of piano playing enhanced the mood of the whole service. Frank Hetzer, Cliff Cullum, and Leo all took part in the readings and prayers. I had told Cliff, the moderator, that he could choose the blessing to close the service. The ending that he prepared and that Earl spontaneously entered into was so tremendously inspired and enjoyable that everyone was happy and smiling, so glad to have been there! To God be the glory! Amen.

Sunday, September 6, 2009. My daughter MaryBeth and her sons John and Graham came from Massachusetts to spend part of the Labor Day weekend with us. Her husband Charles had to skip this trip due to an illness, from which he is recovering. Besides having 2 wonderful visits with the 3 of them here at Sky View, MaryBeth did some important editing work for me. At last I have completed the essay that also serves as the preface to my book, SETTING MY SIGHTS ON THINGS ABOVE. Now I can work on cleaning up some details on that book, work I look forward to doing – after I finish preparing for my brother’s anniversary celebration, that is!

Wednesday, September 9, 2009. Today, to celebrate Back to School Day, we had a spelling bee here at Sky View, and I was one who took part in it. Casey, our director of activities, made up a wonderful set of rules for the game. She set up 3 categories of words: easy, medium and hard, and assigned a point value to each: 2, 5 and 10. Every time it was our turn to spell, we first chose our category. Then Casey read us a sentence about September from an activities magazine, and from it, chose a word of the appropriate difficulty. If we spelled the word correctly, we cheered each other, and if we missed a word, as I did once, we were not eliminated, but simply received no points for that round. When the hour was over, there was no adding up of points and declaring a winner. Instead, we returned to our floors rejoicing in the mental stimulation we had just had and marveling at how many good spellers Sky View has!

Don’t get the idea that our points were lost, however. After any game such as this, the points we earned are added to those we had previously accumulated, and then several times a year we get a chance to redeem our points for merchandise!

Monday, September 28, 2009. The past 19 days since my last entry have been filled with work related activities and with visits. I call writing projects “work” when I have the pressure of a deadline to meet, and recently I have had two: writing a story for my brother’s anniversary, scheduled for October 10, and writing a service for October 1. I finished the service yesterday. The story is also finished, though the work of gathering the artifacts and previous stories that I want to send to the

event with my family is not yet finished. George, Janet and Marty are all helping me with this part, much to my delight. So many happy memories have been stirred up in preparing this gift! I cherish each one.

Besides my regular visitors, in September I had the privilege of a visit from Beth, a friend I hadn't seen for at least 4 or 5 years. Our reunion was SO refreshing for both of us. Time seemed to melt into eternity, as though God had arranged the appointment, something that easily could have been true. At one point Beth said she wished she could have brought her mother with her. Both of us knew that could not happen, though, for Rosemary, who also had been a dear friend of mine, had died three years earlier after a long, debilitating illness. And then, as we spoke of her, it almost seemed to me as if she were there, smiling as her daughter and I conversed. When Beth left, she took my website address with her. What she left behind was a deep satisfaction and joy that still lingers.

A few days later our son Paul arrived from California to spend a week with us. That means that in the past two months we have had visits from each of our five children. That, too, was refreshing, a BONUS rather than something expected, for neither Leo nor I want to load our children with obligations concerning visits. The reason Paul came here at this particular time was to attend his 25th High School reunion. He said the reunion was all he had hoped it would be! Thank you, Lord!

Since Paul is in charge of transportation for the handicapped in Fresno, CA, I thought he might enjoy taking me on a Paratransit trip to see how the system works here. He agreed, and proceeded to make arrangements for me to visit my friends at Drum Hill on Monday, September 21. I was so happy with that trip! Staff members and residents who knew me when I lived there were as glad to see me as I was to see them. Paul was an excellent companion for this assignment, facilitating the conversation and handing out copies of my latest poem and an essay that we had brought with us. We also spent time in the apartment that Leo and I used to share, and where he now lives alone – except when he has overnight guests, such as Paul. Our son was pleased with the Paratransit service that he saw; I appreciate it, too.

Wednesday, September 30, 2009. Since I have nothing different to report about my health, I am going to conclude this essay with a poetic writing about the Bible that Marty found on a card inside my Grandma's Bible while working on Bob's gift. "That's a good book review!" Marty commented after she read it aloud to me. I smiled and nodded in agreement. Here it is. What do you think?

THE BIBLE

This book contains the mind of God, the state of man, the way of salvation, the doom of sinners, and the happiness of believers. Its doctrines are holy, its precepts are binding, its histories are true, and its decisions are immutable. Read it to be wise, believe it to be safe, and practice it to be holy. It contains light to direct you, food to support you, and comfort to cheer you. It is the traveler's map, the pilgrim's staff, the pilot's compass, the soldier's sword, and the Christian's charter. Here Paradise is restored, heaven opened, and the gates of hell disclosed. Christ is its grand object, our good its design, and the glory of God its end. It should fill the memory, rule the heart, and guide the feet. It is a mine of wealth, a paradise of glory, and a river of pleasures. It is given you in life, will be opened in the judgment, and will be remembered forever. It involves the highest responsibility, will reward the greatest labor, and will condemn all who trifle with its sacred contents.

Author unknown.