

A PENNY FOR YOUR THOUGHTS – 19

APRIL – JUNE, 2010

Thursday, April 1, 2010. Many thoughts come to mind as I open a new edition of my Penny journals, in which I write about my life in a nursing home with PLS (primary lateral sclerosis). In case you are a new reader of mine, I will briefly bring you up to date on my condition.

Currently, I am unable to walk or talk. I get around in a motorized wheelchair, and use a Lightwriter to help me speak. This marvelous instrument is a small computer that sits on my lap waiting for me to type a message, which can be delivered in one of two ways: the recipient can read on the screen what I have typed or I can make the machine speak aloud the message I have written. This progressive disease has also severely limited the use of my hands and arms. Besides that, I have a feeding tube, and take nothing by mouth. I wear diapers because I have no bladder control. My mouth hangs open and I drool, some days more than others. My emotions are heightened, and I make loud noises when I laugh or cry.

But all of the above is only a description of my physical condition. The part of me that is Verna, the part that is eternal, is just fine! This nursing home is a good place for me to live and to carry on a vital ministry. The centerpiece of this ministry is a service called Scripture and Prayer with Verna and Friends, which I write and assign to a team of people who come here to present it on the first Thursday of every month. (Yes, this was the day; more about that later.) I am so aware of God's presence with me that each day truly is an adventure! Now that you know something about me, I will go on with my journal entries.

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Last week my daughter MaryBeth sent me an email that transported me in memory to April 17, 1966. Late in the evening I was in the hospital, about to give birth to our fifth child. My doctor, knowing that the next day was my birthday, asked me if I preferred the baby to be born before or after midnight. "Definitely BEFORE," was my lighthearted answer. "I want the birth certificate to say I was 32 when the baby was born, rather than 33!" And the doctor and I had a good laugh. At 23 minutes before midnight, my wish became a reality with the birth of Paul!

MaryBeth correctly guessed that the way I felt then was the way she felt when she found that the US Census wanted everyone's age as of April 1. Guess when her birthday is? That's right: April 2! The thought made her chuckle. I emailed back that I enjoyed the connection between the two stories, smiling as I typed. Joy is contagious!

My daughter's email made me wonder how I would be counted for the census. When I inquired, I found out that census officials would be coming to our social work department for the information on all the residents. So the census became another thing I didn't have to worry about, another benefit of living in a nursing home.

Thursday, April 8, 2010. We are having a HEAT WAVE in early April. The temperature these past few days has been in the high 80s! The many trees that I see from the windows of Sky View are putting on their spring attire, mostly various shades of light green, with enough pink to make the woods interesting. The biggest acknowledgment of our unusually hot weather came today when Sky View's maintenance men turned on our air conditioning system!

Far more important than the weather, we have just come through a highly significant time in the religious calendar. It all began on Sunday, March 28, which was Palm Sunday and the start of what some call Holy Week, culminating in Easter on April 4. Then at sundown on Monday, March 29, the

Jews began their 8-day celebration of Passover. I like when these holidays coincide, as they have so much in common. I made this a major point in our service for April 1, especially emphasizing the connection between the lambs killed in the first Passover and Christ, our Passover lamb, who died that we might live. I enjoyed creating what Cliff called a "group sermon," titled The Lamb of God. Cliff was the main reader. There were two inserts: a Scripture reading from Exodus 12, which Leo read, and a piece I called The Lamb of God Trio, read by Leo, Frank, and Harvey.

Then, just 3 days later, we were back with Easter Service with Verna and Family! George and Janet were there with two of their sons: Evan (home from college) and Andrew. The service was a very joyful one, appropriate for its happy subject. George and Leo did the readings, and Andrew (violin) and Evan (trumpet) helped their father (keyboard) with the music. Christ is risen! Because he lives, I can face tomorrow – literally! The risen Christ is my strength today as he has been all my life, and he will lead me Home.

Monday, April 12, 2010. Today was a beautiful spring day, perfect for taking a ride to observe nature's resurrection. Fortunately, this was the day chosen weeks ago for me to get my ears cleaned at a doctor's office a few towns away. My eyes took in as much beauty as they could, so I could enjoy watching the replay on the screen of my mind anytime I wanted. P.S.: I was also glad to move to the OTHER side of my annual ear cleaning! The doctor asked me if I had ALS. I shook my head and typed PLS on my Lightwriter. He read the message and nodded.

Sunday, April 18, 2010. Today is the 77th anniversary of my birth, and the day I begin living my 78th year on earth. Staff members from the activities department came to my room this morning and tied a balloon to my chair, their regular custom. These past few days have been full of birthday reminders: cards, emails, visits, gifts, and cheery good wishes, some prompted by the balloon. I have been honored, and it felt good; now I must spread that good feeling to others on THEIR birthdays, too! Excuse me – I must go send an email.

Friday, April 23, 2010. Yesterday a wonderful event took place here at Sky View: the annual Volunteer Brunch. All 10 of the people who present Scripture and Prayer with Verna and Friends were glad to be invited, and 6 were able to attend: Earl, Loretta, Cliff, Frank, Barbara and Sharon. Leo, George, Harvey and John sent their regrets. Even though I could not eat any of the food because I eat and drink through a feeding tube, I sat at the volunteer table and enjoyed the company of everyone, both our team members and the other volunteers who were present. The mood at our table was as cheerful as the beautiful centerpiece of mixed flowers that increased our pleasure.

The brunch, served cafeteria-style, also served as the midday meal for the residents. The food looked absolutely delicious to me, and what variety there was! The volunteers made all sorts of appreciative comments throughout the meal. If I could eat normally, I'm sure I would enjoy the food served here, just as I have in other places where I have boarded. Casey, the activities director, and Diane, director of social work, both expressed their appreciation to all of us, and we were given lovely gifts. It was a worthy "Thank you" indeed!

Monday, May 3, 2010. I spent the time between the last entry and this writing the May service, handling several business matters, and maintaining friendships through visits and emails. Some of the visits involve family members and friends coming to see me in my room, and some involve my leaving the room to mingle with residents and staff. The latter I must do by design; I am in bed all morning, and in the afternoons and evenings there are so many things I enjoy doing in my room that I forget to go out, if I'm not careful. Ruth and Lorraine, the residents I wrote about in Penny 18, and I

maintain our good connection, bound together by laughter and by God. Come to think of it, those are the ingredients that bind me to many residents and friends. Truly, the joy of the Lord is my strength!

Wednesday, May 5, 2010. It's been a long time since I wrote anything about my dreams, but I had one in each of the past two nights that I would like to remember. In both of them, as in all others, I remain true to myself in attitudes and actions while asleep. This is so important to me! I like to watch good movies, but I know better than to think that the way the actors behave in the films is necessarily the way they are when not acting. Actors have to pretend, and a vast number are very good at their craft. In contrast, if you were to watch my dreams on a movie screen, you would find that the story lines are often absurd and mixed up, but if you focused on the person named Verna, you would be learning to know me as I really am. Let me tell you these two dreams as examples.

In the first one I was out shopping with Evelyn, my next-door neighbor here at Sky View. She wanted to buy a certain brand of birthday card for her daughter, because those cards usually had such lovely verses and drawings on the inside that they were often cut from the cards and framed. I was more familiar with the town than Evelyn was, so when she asked if I knew where she might find those specific cards, I said I would go with her on the quest. Unlike our current situation, in the dream both of us were walking and I was able to talk. There was a large card shop a few blocks away, but also a small Christian bookstore, owned by my friend Sue, that we would be passing on the way. Knowing that there were some cards of the desired line in that store, and wanting to bring business to Sue, we went there first.

While Evelyn looked through the birthday cards, I browsed through the children's section, finding several helpful items for my students. Returning to Evelyn, I found her admiring a card that actually was for a son. "I like the saying on the inside," she said. "It would work for either a son or a daughter." "Maybe we could find a card for a daughter that is exactly the same size. Buy them both, and then you could cut the front off the second one and paste it over the front of the first one," I suggested, and we began searching the rack for such a card.

The End.

The second one was inspired, I'm sure, by some Scriptures I had been pondering. The setting was familiar to me: I was at Good Tidings Bible Conference, located in the mountains of upstate New York. A "vehicle" was there that was able to lift up into the air. It looked something like a basket with a handle, one that you might fill with fruit and give as a gift to a friend. It was so large that two adults could stand side by side in it, facing the handle and holding onto it as the "basket" lifted. Other people were outdoors enjoying the beautiful summer day as my great adventure was about to begin. I climbed into the contraption, which was more complicated than I have made it seem, stood in my spot, held onto the handle, and soon was floating among the clouds above the camp fields. It was exhilarating!

Part way along in my leisurely trip, I became aware that someone was standing by my side in the "basket," facing forward, and holding onto the handle. It was Cliff Parent, a man with whom I worked in the service of the Lord for many years and in various places, including at Good Tidings. Cliff died a number of years ago in his old age; in my dream he was in his prime, fit, and so obviously happy! Our flight continued for some time, and was always upward, never downward. Yet eventually it gently came to rest against a grassy hill! "Could this be Heaven?" I wondered in my dream. "Is this trip meant to teach me what death is like for a believer: that is, it begins on earth, ends in Heaven, and the transition seems like an adventure, as if there really isn't any death?"

The End.

NOTES: When I told Evelyn about the dream, I found out something I had not known before: she has no children! We shared hearty laughter as she read what I typed. As for the second story, it is not unusual for me to try to analyze my dreams within the dreams themselves. Now, several days later, I would answer those questions with a solid "Yes!" Incidentally, Cliff Parent appeared in my dreams once before in the same capacity. That time he was with my father, also a resident of Heaven. Both of them looked fit and happy at that time, too!

Friday, May 14, 2010. It's the middle of the month already! The May service has come and gone, leaving happy memories behind. George moderated the meeting in Cliff's absence and, for the second time, my resident friend Ruth took part, reading my poem "There Is A God." As I write this, I feel an urgency to begin writing the June 3 service, using the ideas already in my head. The reason I want to start early is that much is going on in my family right now, and the end of the month, with the Memorial Day holiday, promises to be busier still. I know I could have more energy to devote to family if the service were completed. So I will say goodbye for now and get to work!

Saturday, May 22, 2010. Yesterday I put the finishing touches on the service for June. The project took less time than I had expected, thanks to my Lord! Here is what happened. As I said, I had some ideas formulating in my mind that I wanted to pursue, mainly concerning creation. My first thought was to see what I might have previously written on the subject, since it is a favorite topic of mine. The index on my computer screen showed 2 obvious titles: Creation and Creation 2. Figuring that the latter might be an updated version of the former, I opened it first. Good choice! There before my eyes was one of my ideas, completely written out and more than enough to be the whole program! The writing, shrouded in mystery, was called God As Creator, and consisted of an introduction and then the text of Genesis 1, broken up into 9 readings. After each section there were several references from other places in the Bible that commented on the reading from Genesis. The mystery is that I don't know why I wrote that program, nor when. I have had this computer for 10 or 11 years, so it can't be older than that. Putting aside my curiosity, I spent this past week adapting the program for our service, all the while giving thanks to God for his timely provision!

As for our family, a major change is taking place today. Early in 2004 Leo and I left our house in Yorktown Heights, which was subsequently sold, and moved into an apartment in Drum Hill, a senior living community in Peekskill, about 7 miles away. In December, 2005 I entered the nursing home at Sky View, again just a few miles away. Since then Leo has been living in our Drum Hill apartment – until today! Some time ago our daughter Marty and her husband Ed, who also lived in Yorktown Heights, began looking for a house in Peekskill that would include quarters for Leo. They found one, and today is his moving day! Our son David and his son John, a college student, are coming up from North Carolina around Memorial Day to do some painting and other work at the Peekskill house. MaryBeth and her family also plan to come from Massachusetts for a visit next weekend. It will be a busy, but happy, time. I look forward to it.

Sunday, May 23, 2010. Once again this date brings happy memories to my mind: 59 years ago today, in 1951, I graduated high school and 4 years later, on the same date, I graduated from college. I wonder if I would have remembered either date if the two had not coincided? Probably not. What I treasure far more than this fact is that I am still in touch with many classmates and friends both from high school and college. They are unforgettable!

I had a sweet treat this past week: Helen, one of my former aides, came into my room carrying her absolutely beautiful 6-month-old daughter! Helen had started working again some time ago, but was assigned to a different floor. She had stopped by to greet us before, but this was the first time she brought her baby, doubling the pleasure. Babies and young children are always welcome visitors at Sky View!

Tuesday, May 25, 2010. I have come to enjoy so much listening to audio books on CD. I have reached the point where I can say “I have read that book” when I complete a set of CDs, knowing that “reading” means getting the contents of the book into your brain, whether through your eyes, your ears, your fingers, or some other way that I don’t know about. I can still read words with my eyes; if I couldn’t, I would have to stop typing, too. The problem is that books are too heavy and awkward for me to hold, and my fingers have such a hard time turning pages that it hardly seems worth the effort. From my school days I have always had to battle a wandering mind when reading. It is no different with audio books. This new method of reading, though, has made me freshly aware of my fault, and I am trying to improve my concentration. Perhaps it’s not too late to change!

Here are some audio books I have recently read and enjoyed: The Help by Kathryn Stockett; Gilead by Marilynne Robinson; and Alice I Have Been by Melanie Benjamin. Gilead was one of the last books I read the traditional way, more than 5 years ago. I wanted to refresh my memory because I heard the author has written a new book that refers to this one. I continue to reread The Bible Experience as well. This story never grows stale!

Leo read to me a book with which I could really identify: Letters From the Land of Cancer by Walter Wangerin Jr., an author whose books I have thoroughly enjoyed. When he was diagnosed with serious cancer, he decided to write a series of letters to his family and friends about his journey through the land of cancer to his heavenly Home. The letters were faith-filled and positive; Walter was all set for this great adventure with God. Then the treatments began to work in his body and it became apparent that he was going to be on earth longer than he thought. All this required shifts in attitude, which are captured in his letters and meditations. As far as I know, Walter is still here, teaching a weekly Bible class, several years after he had expected to be gone. And here I am, continuing to type, marveling that I am still able to do it!

This month I saw the DVD of The Memory Keeper’s Daughter, a fascinating fictional work. Now I am debating whether or not I want to also read the book. My thanks to all who recommend books and movies to me and to Leo, who orders them from the library and brings them to me. Leo is now reading to me Alice in Wonderland, as a follow-up for Alice I Have Been.

Monday, May 31, 2010. What satisfying visits I had with our out-of-state family members over this holiday weekend! I saw the Dyers – MaryBeth, Charles, John (13), and Graham (11) – on 3 different occasions, which gave us a chance to catch up on family news, as well as time for me to observe my grandsons at this stage of their lives: a great pleasure! As a bonus, MaryBeth was able to slip into the role of Editor part of the time, helping me to get back on track for finishing my book Setting My Sights on Things Above. How I appreciated her valuable advice!

David and his son John (19) worked at Marty and Ed’s house for a couple days, building an outdoor staircase and painting two rooms, before they came to see me. Then late yesterday afternoon I had them to myself for nearly two hours before they headed back home to North Carolina. I had not seen John for almost 6 years. What a change! Here before me sat a composed, articulate, wonderful young man with whom I could have conversed happily for hours! It has been a joy watching our grandchildren develop from babies to children to adults. More about that in a moment. First, this:

Probably because they had run out of Happy Birthday balloons, the one given to me on April 18 by Sky View came with the message You’re So Special. It is heart-shaped, and has on it a large teddy bear attired in a dress and a big, floppy hair bow. I decided to keep it in my room as long as its contents held it up, a few days at the most, I figured, if past balloons served as a standard. Amazingly, the bear still smiles at me from its lofty position, with the entire balloon now becoming an object that sends my thoughts Heavenward.

Back to our grandchildren. We have eleven: 8 males and 3 females. They live in 4 states, with Sophia, Amanda and Robert in California; Paul, John and Amy in North Carolina; Eric, Evan and Andrew in New York; and John and Graham in Massachusetts. Each of them is engraved on my heart. To each I can honestly say, "You're so special." The word 'special' has a number of meanings, among them: unique; set apart for a purpose; and honored. I'm thinking here of God's family as well as my own. God has his family members engraved on the palm of his hand, indicating that they are permanently his. And each one is different, unique. For example, we each have different fingerprints. Only God is creative enough for that to happen! My grandchildren are individuals, too. They don't all think the same or have the same interests, abilities, or ways of learning, but that's okay! One thing I know: they are all here for a reason; they are part of God's plan. I salute them all and commit them to God. Grandchildren, I love you so much! You're so special!

Thursday, June 3, 2010.

Nadine has asked me to write her a poem
Because yesterday she turned 44.
From my point of view, she's still quite young!
Who could ask for anything more?

I owe you heartfelt thanks, Nadine,
For watching over me, even though
Usually I am not your own resident
As Sky View assignment lists go.

Here's an idea of how we got together -
(I'll bet you'll give this thought a nod) -
It was part of a great, eternal plan
Written large by the hand of God.

Let's enjoy our relationship now, while we can.
Who knows what tomorrow may bring?
In Heaven we'll be together forever
With Jesus, our Savior and King!

Thank you, Lord.

P.S.:

Gratitude and poetry don't ALWAYS have to mix.
Shall we wait for your next poem until you're 46? :-)

Love,
Verna

Sunday, June 6, 2010. You can see from the above poem how I have spent the last few days. I was so surprised when Nadine asked me for a second poem! I had written one for her a year or two ago, which, she told me, was on her refrigerator door and frequently read. She had hardly left my room when ideas and rhyming words began coming to me. I did the final editing today. The next time George or Marty come here, I will have them print the poem on special paper along with some Bible verses and present it to her. I will be glad to do that. Nadine really DOES watch over me!

Our service was on Thursday, and all went well. One person there for the first time was Novelette, my evening aide, who came to Sky View an hour before her shift started so she could attend. She stood in the aisle behind the residents, which gave her room to move about during the singing of the songs. And move she did, especially when we sang He's Got the Whole World In His Hands. It was beautiful to see!

Thursday, June 10, 2010. I had an interesting day on Tuesday. I got up several hours earlier than usual and went with Carolyn Burke by Paratransit to the United Methodist Church in Shrub Oak to attend a monthly prayer meeting led by my friend Vallie Turner. I used to attend these meetings when I could, and sometimes, through the years, I was their speaker. As we neared our destination, we ran into a detour which ended beyond the church. Our driver turned the bus around and told a workman where we wanted to go. He suggested we drive behind the store next to us and into the church's parking lot from there. It worked! A couple men from the church met us, answered our question (a wind storm on Sunday had blown down some trees in front of the church), and told us that the electricity, out since the storm, had not yet been restored! We had the meeting anyway, with the natural light being more than sufficient.

After two and a half satisfying hours spent with friends in the presence of our Lord, Carolyn and I left to return to Sky View. As the bus driver wended his way through roads familiar and unfamiliar, I began to make plans for my return. After Carolyn left, I would have my aide put me on the toilet, and then, after I was refreshed and back in my chair, I would rest awhile. But when we got to 413, we found several workmen in the room, busily at work removing my old air conditioner and installing a new system. They asked me to stay out until they had finished, saying they were almost done. So I parked my chair in the hallway outside the room, tilted it back, and had my rest BEFORE my refreshing. Almost an hour later the workmen and I changed places. What I found, besides the new unit, was a coating of dust over everything, plus a variety of alien smells. I knew both of these could cause respiratory problems, but this became something to be accepted, since there was nothing I could do about it (we prayed the serenity prayer at our service last week!). Tuesday was a day that the Lord had made, and I did rejoice and was glad in it!

Wednesday, June 16, 2010. One thing Ruth and I enjoy doing as we sit together in the elevator lobby is practicing the Spanish that we studied in high school and college, 3 years for Ruth and 2 and a half for me, I think it's amazing how much the two of us combined remember, considering that around 60 years have passed since we were school girls. Many people who work at Sky View have English as their second language and Spanish as their first. They often talk to each other in their native language at a speed that cuts me off from comprehending all but the most common words and phrases. The workers smile when residents try to speak Spanish with them, or, in my case, when I type Spanish words. However, I can't put the Lightwriter on "talk" because the female voice in the computer is programmed to give all words an English pronunciation. But Ruth and I can overcome that obstacle and have fun with the mental challenge we are giving each other.

One of the greatest pleasures of my life came as a result of my study of Spanish. In 1956 I left Pennsylvania and went to Tucson, Arizona because I had been hired to teach first grade in the public school system there. The application had asked about the knowledge of languages other than English. Due to my answer, I was assigned to teach at Ochoa School, largely populated then by children with a Mexican heritage. Many of my students had spent the previous year in a classroom designed to teach English to those who did not know it from home. Sometimes my pupils would go against the rules and speak Spanish to each other, especially if they were trying to keep something from me. Once when they were lined up to go outdoors, I went to the head of the line, pointed to each one in turn, and in a barely audible voice, counted all 35 of them in Spanish. They were shocked! "She knows Spanish!" they said to each other, as all thoughts of breaking the rule dropped

away. Happy memory! Ochoa was the right school for me! God knew that, and had me prepare by choosing to study Spanish in high school. Amazing!

Sunday, June 27, 2010. Several issues ago, I mentioned that when we got a different TV server at Sky View last year, we lost the 24-hour religious channel; hence, I could no longer watch James Merritt and David Jeremiah on Sunday mornings, an experience I used to call “going to church.” All my life going to church was an enjoyable part of my Sunday routine, right up to the point where it was physically impossible. After I had adjusted to the fact that my TV church going was over, I found through surfing (we have no channel guide) that a couple secular channels had a few regularly scheduled Christian programs. You guessed it: among them was a half hour sermon on Sunday mornings, given by a man I did not know, that serves very well as my current “going to church” experience. He is A.R. Bernard from the Christian Cultural Center in Brooklyn, NY. He is basically a teacher (as am I), with an interesting teaching method. So once again the Lord has provided for me, and my soul is satisfied!

Monday, June 28, 2010. Yesterday I finished writing the service for July 1. Our topic is God as Redeemer, and one of the hymns we will sing is Amazing Grace. On Saturday, while I was meditating on this vast and glorious subject, words and phrases began to form in my mind that I knew would end up as a poem. Actually, it seemed to be an additional verse to Amazing Grace, for it could be sung to that tune. By Sunday I had 2 verses. I looked at them and recognized that they were the first and last verses of a separate poem, one called Amazing Love. I was anxious to see what the middle of the poem would be!

During the night I found out. Around midnight, Margaret, one of the night aides, came into my room to say hello. “I’m not your aide tonight,” she said, and soon she was gone. After that, the words of my new poem came to mind, and soon, while lying on my bed in the dark, I was working on a verse 2, something for the middle. I tried out different phrases, sang it (mentally!), and tried hard to retain it until it could be written down. I was still awake when, around 2:00, Margaret came in again – not to take care of me, she just came in! Eagerly, I motioned to her that I wanted my Lightwriter. “Write down what I type,” Margaret read on the Lightwriter screen. Quickly she got paper and pen from my desk and prepared to take “dictation.” “Very nice,” she said when we finished, and then she left. Now I will let you read (or sing) the poem, and then I will make a few more comments.

Amazing Love

*Written by Verna Kwiatkowski. Sky View.
May be sung to the tune of Amazing Grace.*

Amazing love that rescued me, when I was bending low –
I had no hope, then Love stepped in, and now I upward go.

This love has wrapped around my life, and set my sights above.
I never am alone; God’s always here. I know – for God is love.

I’m heading to Emmanuel’s Land. I have a home up there.
While still on earth, I’ll do God’s will, and then his glory share.

Comments: The italic lines that I often put under the titles of my poems is an idea copied directly from the Psalms. I like to read the information that comes under the number of many of the Psalms:

the author, the setting, and sometimes the name of a tune to which the Psalm may be sung. I have often wondered how those tunes sounded!

Also, just as *Amazing Grace* is John Newton's personal story, and we enter into his experience of God by singing it, so *Amazing Love* is my personal story. For example, take the line "I never am alone; God's always here. I know – for God is love." What makes me think so? Didn't God send Margaret to me at just the right time? Wasn't that a loving thing to do? God has done countless similar loving things for me over the course of my life, and I am so grateful!

The Bible mentions songs in the night. Does God give songs in the night today? Yes, he does; this song bears witness to that! I hope you will enter into my experience of God as you sing *Amazing Love*, and to God be the glory! Amen.

Wednesday, June 30, 2010. Before I close, I want to bring you up to date on the books I have been reading. I did read *Home*, the book by Marilynne Robinson that parallels her previous book *Gilead*. I'm glad I read them in the order I did; they really are a wonderful 2-book set. Also, I did decide to read *The Memory Keeper's Daughter*, by Kim Edwards, finishing it today. To me, it was well worth reading, even though I'd seen the movie, which depicted the book very well.

Leo is in the middle of reading aloud a book that is of particular interest to me: *On My Way to Heaven*, subtitled *Traveling with Grace*, and written by Vivian S. Ziegler. It is a biographical account of the life of Victor K. Ziegler, the author's brother-in-law. Victor was also my father's first cousin, their dads being brothers. Victor and I, then, were first cousins once removed; what's more, we were born within months of each other. But the only time I mingled with Dad's vast number of cousins was at the annual Ziegler Reunion. My memory of Victor comes from the later reunions, when we were well into our family-raising years. He emerged from the group as a natural master of ceremonies, a comedian, quick-witted, able to command attention. I attended my last Ziegler Reunion in 2001; Victor died in 2004. I have no regrets for what might have been, had I known Dad's family better, for I will know them in Heaven. Meanwhile, I am thoroughly enjoying getting to know Victor's amazing faith story through Vivian's book. She autographed my book, sent to me by Levi Ziegler, another of Dad's cousins. She wrote: "Travel with joy on your way to Heaven!" and signed her name. I am doing just that, Vivian, and I hope my readers are doing the same.

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I still have the "You're so special" balloon, although I plan to give it away soon. I could honestly give the balloon to many, many people, for I do hold people close to my heart. That's how GOD holds US, right? Let's be lavish in spreading God's love to others. There's plenty to go around!

See you, Lord willing, in Penny 20!

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