

A PENNY FOR YOUR THOUGHTS – 32

(JULY – SEPTEMBER, 2013)

Friday, July 5, 2013. Welcome to Penny 32! I have many stories to select from in beginning this issue, all of them encouraging! Eventually you will hear them all, but I've decided to start with one I call:

OH, HAPPY DAY!

About a year ago I reported in my journal that I had a visit from Helen, my caseworker from the ALS association, the caseworker I didn't know I had until she made an appointment to see me! Subsequently, I told you that she put me in touch with a Catholic nun named Noel who also has PLS. Primary Lateral Sclerosis is so rare that I never expected to meet someone who has the same disease. Mutual friends have told me about three men who have PLS, two in Pennsylvania and one in California, but I have had no contact with any of them.

With Noel, things were different. Helen brought us together not only because of our shared disease, but also because of our shared faith. From the start, as we began our email correspondence, our spiritual connection predominated, that is, Noel and I would have been glad to meet even if both of us were physically healthy. PLS did help to seal the bond between us, though.

Early this year we began to wonder if we could meet, since we live only about 5 miles apart. Helen encouraged us in our plans, which would be implemented in warmer weather. My friend and traveling companion, Carolyn, was also excited about this outing, and made arrangements with Paratransit for taking us to the Maryknoll complex, where Noel resides in the nursing home. Noel and I decided to trust our Father with the weather when the chosen date appeared in the midst of a string of days where scattered thunderstorms were predicted. Finally it was –

Tuesday, July 2, 2013, the day Noel and I saw each other face to face, and oh, it was wonderful! Even the weather cooperated: we got there and back before the rain came! Helen and Carolyn were there, too, all of us together because two of us have PLS! Truly God works ALL things together for our good, even disease! I will continue giving thanks in my circumstances, and waste no emotional energy wishing things were different! And now Noel will plan a trip to visit me at Sky View, Lord willing. Only God knows how this story will end!

Monday, July 15, 2013. Since the August service is well underway, I will return to my journal and tell you about some of the other interesting projects and events that have been happening in the last month or so. In June I had no service to prepare, as we had canceled it to allow Sky View to celebrate July 4, which fell on the first Thursday. I used my "free" time to do a different kind of writing. It began by my copying the story about turning 80 from Penny 31 into a separate document, modifying it somewhat, and turning it into an item I could hand out to people. "Why, this is an essay!" I thought. I had forgotten that I started my previous set of essays in 2004 with short ones, 1 to 3 pages in length. Soon I had revised the page I had written about my grandmother, called Not

Growing Old, and two other early pieces, one re-titled My Testimony and one titled My Name Is.... To the latter I added more than a page on obedience, which includes some thoughts I have had for a long time, but never had written down. Now I have a collection of new essays all ready to hand out, and a mind full of ideas for more! I don't know what will become of this project. Stay tuned!

In addition, Cliff has offered to see if he can transfer my Bible Basics seminars from tapes to CDs. I used many visual aids when I taught these courses. If the transfer works, perhaps a booklet of the handout sheets I distributed would also need to be assembled. To me, this project is both overwhelming and so desirable! How I loved teaching Bible Basics 1, Bible Basics 2, and Set Free! I will now leave this work into the hands of others and of God.

Besides my regular visitors, whom I appreciate so much, I have had other visitors who have expanded my borders. The first was Roberta, a woman who said she had been reading my materials for 3 years and wanted to meet me. It turns out we have many friends in common, which is not unusual in God's family. I also met Hazel, a prominent woman in the church my husband Leo attends and serves. I had heard a lot about Hazel, and she about me, so it didn't seem as if we were meeting for the first time! That's also how it is in God's family.

One day as I was leaving my room, I found 2 women about to enter. They said they were Val and Rita, from the Physical Therapy department. Apparently someone had reported to PT that I was having increasing difficulty with typing and with driving my chair. PT was offering me 6 sessions in my room to see if I could be helped. So on that day (a Friday) and Monday through Friday of the next week, either Val or Rita came to give a combination of exercises for my hands and arms. I THINK the exercises did help me. I KNOW my list of friends increased by 2, for Val and Rita both greet me warmly when they see me in the halls.

Friday, July 26, 2013. One other piece of business, left unfinished at the close of Penny 31, has now been completed. Do you remember Andrea, the aide who sometimes works at Sky View, the one who in June asked me to write a poem for a women's conference? Last week I heard her name called in the day room and went to investigate. There she was, just as I had remembered her. She had forgotten about the poem, and the conference was over, all the more reinforcing the feeling I had before – that GOD was really the one who assigned me to write the poem "In the Image of God." Several people have told me they were helped by the poem. Nevertheless, it did feel good to hand over to Andrea the packet of papers I had been saving for her. She may use them as she wishes.

Also last week I had a visit from Anthony Stephens, pastor of the Lutheran church here in Croton. He comes to Sky View on the 3rd Thursday of the month to give what is listed on the activities' calendar as Christian Service. That's how we met; I began attending his service and the Episcopal Service on the 2nd Thursday as soon as I came to Sky View, and getting to know the pastors is one of the many blessings I have received from doing so. Pastor Stephens recently returned from a tour of duty as a chaplain's assistant in Afghanistan. I was eager to hear of his experiences! God is involved in the lives of people all over the globe. What a wonderful, worldwide family God has! What a privilege to be part of it!

Sunday, August 11, 2013. I have two services to prepare for September. On the 5th we will be having our regular service at Sky View, Lord willing, and on the 10th we are scheduled to give one at Praise Fellowship, the group my friend Vallie helps to lead. The latter involves a bus ride to the Methodist Church in Shrub Oak. In the meantime, Carolyn is scheduling another bus trip for me to the Jefferson Valley Mall, where we will do some shopping. To me, that's a very busy schedule! :)

Within the weeks since my last entry, I received a copy of Noel's report of our meeting. I thought it was so beautiful that I asked her if I could put it in my journal so you can enjoy it, too. Here now, not only with her permission, but also with her BLESSING, is the story of our visit from Noel's perspective.

* * * * *

My meeting with Verna, Carolyn, and Helen was a delight! Since Verna and I are both unable to speak, we communicated via the wonders of modern technology – she on her Lightwriter and I on my Boogie Board. Sharing the common bond of PLS, one would think that the focus of our conversation would be on our symptoms. Instead we chose to celebrate the joy of life and friendship. We know the struggles involved in coping with the difficulties of PLS, but we don't dwell on that. Our faith in God gives a vision that brightens our lives – a vision that sees the hand of a loving God in all the circumstances of our daily lives.

During our conversation, Helen noticed that Verna was experiencing difficulty in typing her thoughts on her Lightwriter. She told Verna about a method of communicating by scanning a computer with her eyes, and assured her that an expert at the ALS Clinic could teach her. Verna's happiness in hearing about this new way of communicating was an inspiration to me. I would have thought first of the difficulty involved in this laborious way of communicating. Verna's serenity in accepting a feeding tube is another example to me of graceful acceptance should the day ever come when I, too, might have to accept a feeding tube as a way of nourishment.

Having a friend who has walked the same path ahead of me gives me courage to follow her example. I will be forever grateful to the ALS Clinic whose philosophy of care goes beyond improving the physical condition of each person with ALS or PLS to improving the quality of life for each one.

* * * * *

As the days of July were waning, Casey invited all of us to join in a contest called A is for August. We were to list all the 5 letter words we could think of beginning with the letter A, capitals allowed. We were given a week to complete the project. I gave myself 3 days to concentrate on the game, and then turned in my entry form with 134 words on it. That week I noticed even residents who were not entering the contest were trying to think of words as they talked with each other in the day room. The contest was a unifying diversion!

On Monday, August 5, the last day of the contest, Emma wheeled herself into my room

to show me the certificate she had been given for entering the competition. Obviously pleased, she smiled and said, "You'll get yours." The next day Casey came not only with a certificate, but with a prize for second place – a lovely scarf and bracelet. I do not consider time spent on things like this to be wasted. We have all heard how important it is to exercise our brains. Almost every time Leo visits me, I decode a few cryptoquotes, and sometimes do jumbles as well. Also, I have my 7 hymns posted in my room, intent on memorizing them. And I try hard to remember names, not always successfully. I want my brain to get plenty of exercise.

Why am I telling you this story? Because I think some of you might like to take the A is for August challenge yourselves! Make it a group project, if you wish, rather than a competition; give it a deadline, or leave it open-ended. While typing this entry, I thought of word #135 – Annie, the name of one of my grandmothers. You are welcome to use that word to start your own list, if you wish.

Friday, August 16, 2013. For Leo and me, this past Sunday, August 11th, marked the 55th anniversary of our becoming parents. Yes, our oldest child George is 55! I told him that when I turned 55, I said that my age had reached the speed limit! Since there are multiple speed limits now, unlike then, my little joke doesn't work anymore, except as a story.

On Monday, August 12, this entry was marvelously extended in a way that lets me know that God was involved. I call these events holy moments; they come unexpectedly and fill me with awe. I got an email from George saying he thought I'd enjoy reading a poem that he had included in a memo to his staff that morning. Here is the poem, with comments to follow.

The Old Man's Comforts and How He Gained Them
By Robert Southey (1774–1843)

You are old, Father William, the young man cried,
The few locks which are left you are grey;
You are hale, Father William, a hearty old man,
Now tell me the reason I pray.

In the days of my youth, Father William replied,
I remember'd that youth would fly fast,
And abused not my health and my vigour at first
That I never might need them at last.

You are old, Father William, the young man cried,
And pleasures with youth pass away,
And yet you lament not the days that are gone,
Now tell me the reason I pray.

In the days of my youth, Father William replied,
I remember'd that youth could not last;
I thought of the future whatever I did,
That I never might grieve for the past.

You are old, Father William, the young man cried,
And life must be hastening away;
You are cheerful, and love to converse upon death!
Now tell me the reason I pray.

I am cheerful, young man, Father William replied,
Let the cause thy attention engage;
In the days of my youth I remember'd my God!
And He hath not forgotten my age.

As soon as I read the first line, I had a happy flashback. There I was in the fifth grade reading in my reader the very same poem George had just sent me! Father William must have made a deep impression on me back then, but not so much as he did this week. A visit from my son on Tuesday cleared up two assumptions I had mistakenly made: (1) that George had also known the poem since childhood, and (2) that he had somehow connected the poem with his birthday. In truth, he had only found the poem on Monday, while searching the Internet for something inspiring to include in his memo. It was a happy bonus to him that he chose a poem I knew!

I asked George's advice then on putting this story in Penny 32. He said he was sure the poem was in the public domain. "May I mention your age?" I asked. "Of COURSE!" he replied. "I am FLOURISHING in middle age!" I knew immediately that he was paraphrasing my essay Flourishing in Old Age, based on the end of Psalm 92. I love Father William's philosophy of life! And how fortunate was the young man who sought him out and asked such pertinent questions! I hope you enjoy the poem as much as I do, and enjoy your life with God through all of its stages, as George and I do.

Saturday, August 24, 2013. Today is a beautiful summer day! Down in North Carolina our second son, David, is celebrating his birthday! Here in New York my shopping trip has been accomplished, resulting in a new supply of socks and washcloth bibs for me; the September 10 service has been written and the one for September 5 is well underway; and I am up-to-date in editing the next edition of Sky View's Horizons. My project for today is to record in this journal a holy moment that I want to remember. It happened last Sunday morning, August 18th, but first let me tell you about the way I usually spend my Sunday mornings.

Since the 49-channel package that Sky View subscribes to does not include a religious channel, I have pieced together a program that I consider to be my "going to church" experience. It begins at 7:30 when Charles Stanley begins his 1-hour program with one hymn sung by his massive choir. It ends with a wonderful half hour of Bible teaching from David Jeremiah, beginning at 10:30 on another channel. In between, I like to listen to a CD of The Bible Experience, which takes an hour and 10 minutes. Then I turn on our channel 49, which plays gospel music around the clock. I am in bed during most of my "church" time.

Last Sunday I was no longer thinking about the September 10th service, which focuses on Jesus as the Lamb of God, for I thought I had finished it a couple days earlier. But God knew something was missing, and he used my Sunday morning habits to get the message to me. The first thing I heard was the choir singing a medley that began with "Crown him with many crowns, the Lamb upon his throne" My heart filled with joy,

not only because God had pointed out the perfect hymn to close the service, but also because I was awake in time to hear it! (Normally I wake up after Stanley begins his sermon.) But there was something else: I had intended to conclude with thoughts of the Lamb in Heaven, then completely forgot about it until God stirred my memory. I knew then that when I got up I would be writing a whole new ending for the service!

Then came the part where I listen to the Bible CD's. Last Sunday my CD included the book of Hebrews. As I heard about the blood of Christ being superior to that of animals, I realized how fitting those verses would be at the close of the section about Passover! As soon as I was in my chair I found the verses in Hebrews 9, and typed them into my script. I added the hymn to the end, and selected the passage from Revelation that I wanted to use. Because of its length, I decided to have one of my typists, either Marty or George, do the typing for me. That meant I had to wait until Tuesday, when George regularly visits, because Marty, who comes on Sundays, had already emailed that she and Ed wouldn't be getting back from their trip early enough for her usual visit. In the mid-afternoon I looked up in response to a cheery hello, and there was Marty! Their plans had changed, she said, and yes, she would be happy to type!

Do you see God's fingerprints all over this story, as I do? It was NOT BY CHANCE that I woke up at 7:30 on the 18th, and that the choir had chosen to sing about the Lamb on the throne, and that in my Bible reading I was up to Hebrews, and that Marty's plans changed! I think God WANTS us to catch him at work in our lives, so that God and we may have moments of shared joy together. I highly recommend the practice!

Saturday, August 31, 2013. Today is a special day in several ways. In Massachusetts the Dyer family is traveling to spend the Labor Day weekend with us, which is always a pleasure; in Annville, Pennsylvania my childhood friend and classmate, Jean, is celebrating her 80th birthday (she will know when she reads this that I remembered her birthday, for my days of sending cards are over, and Jean doesn't have email); and here at Sky View I can have a day of rest, after an intense week of preparing for the service on September 5. How important it is to rest! God knows we are not built for constant pressure!

By the way, I wish that Jean, and all my other friends that do not use email, would know about MailBug by Landel, the system I use. You do not need to have a computer to operate a MailBug, as it works through your phone line instead. I use the Mailbug because my computer does not have an Internet connection. To me, the computer is for writing and storing my materials. The MailBug does have limited capacity, but what pleasure it brings to me! With it I keep in touch with my family and most of my friends all over the world! Check it out!

Thursday, September 5, 2013. Before I tell you about Labor Day weekend, I want to tell you about today. This is the 1st Thursday, so you know we had our service today. It was clear to me, as usual, that God was present with us, and that we were working under his blessing. What a privilege! Now here is a story I call –

THE MILLION DOLLAR SHOW

About 7:30 this evening I went into the Day Room to watch Wheel of Fortune with my

friend Ruth, who was already there. But my eyes were drawn to the sky over the beautiful Hudson River instead. The sun had just set leaving a band of light orange between the dark silhouette of the western shoreline and the dusky turquoise sky. The lights along the shore stood out in sharp contrast to the growing darkness all around them. And in the sky I could see one star, its presence unusual, for typically no stars are visible. But what really caught my attention were the clouds, a small scattering of tiny to medium clouds clustered low along the edge of the turquoise sky, near to the orange band. The feature that captivated my attention was that the clouds were PITCH BLACK! I asked Ruth if she had ever seen such black clouds before, other than in a storm. She turned around in her chair, marveled at the sight, and said no, she didn't think she had. The edge of the sky, where the clouds were, actually looked dirty, as if the sky's tapestry had become soiled by soot, or worse yet, had been marred by spilled ink! Ruth and I watched until the growing darkness had swallowed up all the blotchy, inky clouds, thus cleaning the sky. I checked on the star. It was still there, shining brighter than before in its ebony setting!

On Wheel of Fortune tonight, the woman who went to the Bonus Round won a million dollars, a rare occurrence. And here at Sky View Ruth and I watched a million dollar show that God puts on for us every evening, free of charge. No two are the same! I know many of you enjoy the same "shows." Aren't they awesome?

Saturday, September 14, 2013. This past week I have been busy working on our magazine, Sky View's Horizons, hoping to get another volume into circulation next week. The service at Praise Fellowship was certainly a highlight of the week. Going out in the morning is always hard for me, as it involves disrupting the schedules of many. This time I requested that the Paratransit bus arrive at 9:00, and made plans as if that would happen. Then late Monday evening Carolyn told me by email that the bus was coming at 8:10! I must admit that my first impulse was to panic, although my aide assured me everyone would be notified. In the end all went well, and Carolyn and I were on the bus.

The driver told us he had to pick up another woman before we got to the church. "She's blind," he said, adding that he would be taking her to work after we got off in Shrub Oak. In Croton, not far from Sky View, as soon as the woman came out of her house with her dog, I recognized her as a person important in my past! I was so excited that the driver mistook my flailing arm motions to mean that I was afraid of the dog! Finally Carolyn figured out what I meant, and introductions were made all around. Evelyn remembered me, too, and was surprised to find that I could no longer talk. "What happened?" Evelyn asked. "Disease," Carolyn answered. "Are you her aide?" Evelyn wanted to know. "Yes, I'm her aide," Carolyn wisely answered, soon establishing herself as also my friend and a sister in Christ.

Evelyn has a beautiful singing voice. I met her and saw her from time to time at various women's groups around the county, where she was often the soloist and I was sometimes the speaker. On such occasions I would identify myself to her and we would talk awhile, always bringing honor to our Lord. At least once I was in her home, where I met her husband, who is sighted. But about 18 years had passed since the last time Evelyn and I shared the same space together! Surely GOD had arranged the times so we would meet!

Then Evelyn said something that brought ANOTHER flood of memories to my mind: "I

wish I could tell you how well my son is doing.” “Does she know Juan?” the driver asked incredulously. He was getting almost as much pleasure from our reunion as we were! The answer was a resounding Yes! My mind flashed back to the mid-90s when I was working as the protestant teacher in the Religious Education department of a boarding school for troubled children. One of the last students to join my classes before the whole department was discontinued, was a teenager named Juan, who was also blind. He came to the school with an excellent background in biblical studies, and was as eager to learn more as I was to teach him! I remembered, then, that Evelyn and her husband were in the process of taking Juan into their home as their son when my association with the school abruptly ended. My heart was overflowing with joy during that bus trip, and through the day. Thinking of Jesus as the Lamb of God who died so that we could become his lambs was more powerful than ever when connected with the thought of all the “little lambs” I taught and loved at the school. God knows where and how they are, and has great keeping power! Another holy moment!

Sunday, September 29, 2013. Time to close another issue of Penny! And on the top of my list is to tell you about my Labor Day weekend. The Dyers, that is, my daughter MaryBeth, her husband Charles, and sons John (16) and Graham (14), paid me three substantial visits that weekend, on Saturday, Sunday, and Monday afternoons. Something was definitely different this time; I felt as though we were having a 5-way adult conversation, in which the boys participated as equals. To me, it was delightful! Certainly the topics, such as God, death, and dying, were adult. At one point on Saturday Charles began to look through the stack of DVDs and CDs that I have on the bureau next to my TV set. Happily, his eyes fell on a familiar name: Samuel Morris. (Is the name familiar to you? If not, I will be making known on my website the remarkable story of the young man from Liberia who, led by God, ended up in Taylor University in Upland, Indiana, where he died in 1893 at the age of 20.) Charles asked me about the DVDs, which led to our having a wonderful Sammy Morris weekend, including looking into the materials stored in my Sammy Morris box under my desk at Sky View. Much more later, Lord willing!

Also this: The world seemed to shrink for me in interesting ways last month. First, my friend Luanne Caskey paid me an unexpected visit. She and her family had moved out of the area to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania a number of years ago, due to her husband’s work. Now, with her children all adults, she is again joining her husband in his new work assignment – in United Arab Emirates! She will be as close to me there as she was in Pittsburgh – just an email away! Soon after that, I got a wonderful email from a woman in Australia who had been helped by an essay of mine that she found on the Internet! From Australia to my room in Sky View, the far away has been brought near! All glory to God, who has been doing that for thousands of years (see Ephesians 2:13.)

And so my adventure with God continues, and I pray yours does, too. I’ll see you in the next issue of Penny, Lord willing.

© September, 2013
Verna Kwiatkowski

www.vernakwiatkowski.com