

## A PENNY FOR YOUR THOUGHTS – 3

(MARCH – MAY, 2006)

**Saturday, March 11, 2006.** So many thoughts have been on my mind since I closed the last “Penny” essay on February 28. The first entries in “Penny - 3” will summarize some of them.

I feel so blessed! People keep coming to see me, writing me letters, sending cards and emails, saying such wonderful things that my cup of joy overflows. A couple months ago I sent my children news about my godson Eddie. As part of his reply, my son Paul said, “You have spent your life well.” I have been chewing on that thought ever since. Usually we talk of spending our resources. Hopefully, we do that well, including investing some of it so that we receive interest and dividends in the future. In thinking now of the concept of spending my life, I realize that indeed I have invested myself in the lives of many people, just as others invested in me, and now the dividends come pouring in. What a privilege I have had to draw people closer to God! I feel like I should be thanking those who are thanking me. All thanks ultimately belongs to God, so here and now I gather up all the gratitude and wonderful sentiments and say, “Here it is, Lord, a beautiful bouquet of thanksgiving, all for you! Thank you for investing your life in us and then letting us spend our lives for the sake of others.”

**Tuesday, March 14, 2006.** I need to write something about noise. In this area, there is a big contrast between Drum Hill and Sky View. Our apartment in Drum Hill was so quiet! Other than hearing running water in the bathroom above us, I was hardly aware that we were not alone in the building once our door was closed. Not so at Sky View! Of course the nature of this place requires that there be more noise. My door is almost always open. Staff members come in every day: aides, nurses, housekeepers, laundry workers. Some of those workers push carts through the hallways, and some of those carts could use an oiling to cut down the noise level. The carpeting in the hall is vacuumed daily. Messages come over the public address system. Telephones ring. Television sets blare.

I was really confused the first few nights I was here by the noise produced by the night shift aides. There was so much loud talking and laughing! It sounded like they were gathered in a room nearby having a party. Now I know that night aides work very hard answering the residents’ call bells, including mine. Between jobs they gather in the Day Room, not far from my room, and there they talk and sometimes laugh. I have learned to sleep through these noises.

One noise is so different that it deserves a title before I tell it. Here it is:

### The Squeaky Shoe

There is a man living down the hall from me, whom I will call Brad. He is one of the few people here who walks without an assistive device of any sort. In fact, he has a real spring in his step. Just to look at him and observe his movements, I would never guess he lives in a nursing home. Brad is likable fellow and very helpful as well. He will gladly get a resident a drink of cold water, for example, or push a wheel chair. I heard a woman who had been struggling to propel her chair say to him, “Oh, Brad, you always come along at just the right time!”

I know Brad by another characteristic: he has one shoe that squeaks! Every time he walks past my room, which is many times a day, what I hear is SQUEAK - SQUEAK - SQUEAK - SQUEAK! My hearing is good, so I hear him approaching and receding as well as when he passes my door. The image I have at times is that of the energizer bunny from television. If you are picking up that I find this sound annoying, you are correct. My reaction reminds me that I still have much to learn in this area of life. I have tried ignoring or blocking out the sound. I have also tried praying for Brad

whenever I hear him coming, asking God to bless this kind man who, I imagine, doesn't hear the noise. And I've tried counting my blessings. To paraphrase Robert Frost, one could do worse than have a squeaky shoe to contend with.

The end.

I found it hard to write this whole entry about noise. I felt like I was complaining, for one thing, and I don't want to do that. But there were other things, too, having to do with my diminished capacity. I'll write more about that another time.

**Friday, March 17, 2006.** There has been a lot of change in my body recently. About five weeks ago, my hands and wrists suddenly lost their strength. After that I could not use my walker anymore, nor hold onto the bathroom grab bar while being cleansed and dressed. I really didn't walk after I got to Sky View, but this took me off my feet altogether. My aides use a lift to transfer me from bed to shower chair to Powerchair. To exercise my legs, I try to stand as upright as I can while on the lift. I get some stretching from the Sky View staff and from Leo when he comes to visit.

One day shortly thereafter I noticed that my fingers were swollen. I told the nurse who – with difficulty – removed my wedding ring and then reported this to my doctor. The swelling had gone down somewhat by the time the doctor saw my hands. She felt that the problem was caused by holding my hands in a downward position much of the time and gave advice to counteract the condition. I wondered if that was why my toes were swollen at the end of the day as well.

And then the pain began, first in my hands, fingers and wrists and then occasionally in a shoulder, a knee or a hip. This seems to be joint pain; arthritis comes to mind. When my hands go into spasms, they now hurt. Worst of all is the loss of more of the functions of my hands. I can no longer read newspapers, magazines or books because I can't turn pages. If someone opens the envelopes and removes the contents, I can still read letters and cards. And I like having people read to me. I have enjoyed story hour ever since Lebanon Valley College students read to us children in Annville, PA under the spreading shade tree behind the science building.

There are some things that are causing me distress, other than noise, which I've already mentioned. One is the inability to scratch when my back, for example, itches. Another is that it is hard now to wipe my nose and yet the mucous factory in my head keeps on producing its product day and night. My fingers can barely open drawers anymore and I can not put papers into neat stacks on my desk. How I took these things for granted when I had them! Now they are opportunities for me to let God's grace work in my life. And I will.

**Tuesday, March 28, 2006.** Time for an update. I started writing an entry on March 21 about my adventures of the previous day. As the story got longer and more complex, I realized that it really was a separate essay! So I extracted it from my diary and gave it a title: "This Is the Day." What an unexpected benefit from having a format for jotting down miscellaneous thoughts! I hope to finish that essay this week. And here's another benefit:

Cathy, the nurse practitioner who works with my doctor, came to see me last week. She asked me how I was feeling in general, so I let her read a copy of the above entry. Cathy really appreciated the written report. She explained that the swelling, in her opinion, was due to the relative inactivity of my extremities and that the pain could be controlled by a daily regimen of Tylenol. She didn't think arthritis was involved at all. Then she said something could be done to lessen my body's production of mucous; I hadn't ever considered that a possibility! So now I'm taking more medicine, but if it works, I don't mind. Already my pain has decreased. On March 17 I was just expressing my current condition, not looking for help. Thank you, Lord!

In case you're wondering: "Brad" now walks noiselessly past my room. I don't know what made the difference, but his shoes no longer squeak and I am so grateful!

**Saturday, April 1, 2006.** Here's one more benefit from writing "A Penny for Your Thoughts." When I have visitors I often let them read a portion of my current writing as a way of my joining in the conversation. Often it's my diary that I turn to because of its up-to-date and varied structure. I am so grateful for my Lightwriter which allows me to talk with people, but I'm also grateful for all the pages and pages of writing that I have on my desk, in my file and on my computer. These pages allow me to talk in depth with people on my favorite subject: God.

Let me tell you what happened this morning. When I was being taken to the shower, an aide, whom I barely recognized but who obviously knew me, stopped by with a friendly greeting. She wondered if I remembered her and said she would come to see me after my shower. I was sitting in front of my computer when she came to chat. "What are you doing?" she asked. I was reading my poem and testimony "There is a God", which was still on the screen from last night, when George made copies of the page on rainbow paper for my file. So I scrolled to the top of the page and let her read the poem. She loved it! "Would you like a copy?" I typed. Yes, she would! I directed her to the file and soon she had one of the pretty rainbow papers in her hand. "I'm going to make copies of this and hand them out," she said. After she left, I cried tears of joy. What a privilege to serve the Lord wherever he puts us!

**Monday, April 3, 2006.** Last evening my nurse came in as usual to give me my medicine. As she reached for my feeding tube, I began to laugh. She could do nothing but wait, because when I am laughing (or coughing or crying) the contents of my stomach come back up the tube and nothing will go down. The nurse did not get upset with me; in fact, she joined in my laughter. "What is so funny?" she asked, but of course I could not tell her. Finally I calmed down enough so that she could give me the medicine.

After she left, I went to the computer and wrote down what happened. I printed it out, found her in the hall and gave it to her. Here is what she read:

"It just suddenly struck me as so absurd – so funny! – that someone could reach under my shirt and take out a tube that would give them access to my stomach! One symptom of this illness is that my emotions are out of control. When I start laughing or crying, I often can't stop. Thank you for understanding."

We smiled at each other and another incident was over.

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This morning I went to the day room to socialize a bit and found Judy there as well. One of our younger residents, Judy has multiple sclerosis and has lived here for three years. She sits in a special chair that supports her body and allows her to mingle with others. Fortunately she can read my Lightwriter, so we can talk with each other. "How are you?" I typed. "I'm fine," she said. "I'm incapacitated, but I'm fine." My philosophy, exactly! I look forward to more talks with Judy.

**Wednesday, April 5, 2006.** I am so blessed! When I was being washed and dressed this morning, my aide told me that I had a visitor waiting. "It's a nun," she said. I knew then that Sister Jane, whom I met at Drum Hill, was here. Soon I was in my chair and we were face to face, so glad to see each other. Sister Jane said that all last night she had the recurring thought that she had to go see Verna. And so she came, bearing gifts.

On Monday George brought me copies of my latest two essays, "A Room With a View: From Drum Hill to Sky View" and "This Is the Day." I told him to put two sets on a shelf where I could reach them. This morning I knew that one set was for Sister Jane. She was delighted! "This is just what I need," she said and proceeded to read "This Is the Day" aloud, commenting as she read. Then she prayed for me, and the visit was over. She left with her two essays in hand, promising to come back soon.

"This is the day that the Lord has made." How can I help but be glad and rejoice in it when I am so obviously where my Lord wants me to be for his service?!

P.S. Dorita, a nurse with Visiting Nurses whom I also met while at Drum Hill, popped in to see me at 4:30 on her way to visit someone else on our floor. What an unexpected pleasure! She noticed my name on the wall outside my door and feels that God directed her to me. The other set of two essays went to Dorita!

**Saturday, April 15, 2006** (the day before Easter). This morning my aide said to me, "Are you going home for Easter?" I was startled, but knowing what she meant, I shook my head no. Inside, I was thinking, "I am home. This is where I live." I was glad to see that this truth has taken hold of me.

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Two days ago I attended for the third time the monthly Episcopal service in the main living room here at Sky View. After a wonderful homily about the last supper, the priest came around offering bread and wine to us. When he came to me I shook my head, causing him to nod in recognition. After the service the priest was occupied with cleaning up the table and putting things away so I left, taking my place in the line of those waiting for the elevators. The lobby was unusually active at that particular time. Just then the priest, still in his robes, came up to me and said, "I haven't forgotten you." And he knelt by me right there and prayed for me, as he had the other two times. The Scripture that came to my mind was "I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ ..."

**Monday, April 17, 2006.** This morning, in place of my regular aide, Wendy came to get me out of bed and ready for the day. While I am still lying in bed the aides put my shoes on me, even if I am scheduled for a shower, as was the case this morning. Often my foot will go into a spasm when it is handled; at such times my big toe sticks up, making it difficult to get the shoe on. Since I can't say anything, it is up to the aides to figure out what is happening. Pushing harder doesn't help and can be uncomfortable for me. Usually the aides loosen my shoe laces some more, thinking that's the problem. By then the spasm ends, my toe relaxes and the shoe goes on easily.

Wendy got my right shoe on this morning but my left foot became spastic and my big toe got stuck. Grasping what was going on, Wendy punched my toe through the shoe – POP! Immediately the toe went into place and the shoe was on! The suddenness of the whole incident struck me as so funny that I began to laugh heartily. I pictured my toe as startled, not knowing what on earth had happened to it, but getting the message that it had better lie down, and quickly! I wished I could share the joke with Wendy, for I broke out in laughter at times all the way through my shower and while being dressed.

It was hard to write parts of this story because it started up the laughing again. When Carol, the nurse, tried to give me medicine through my tube a short time ago, she had to stop and wait several times for my laughter to stop. As I said before, nothing will go down the tube while I am laughing or coughing. Carol was patient and laughed along with me, just as Wendy had. The Bible says laughter is good medicine. I certainly had a healthy dose today! Now I will show this to Wendy and Carol, so they can be in on the joke as well. I hope this story will bring a smile to you who are reading it, too.

**Wednesday, April 26, 2006.** Sometimes a story gets stuck in my head and will not leave until I write it down. The one I am about to relate happened more than eight years ago and resurfaced this year on March 3. A couple days earlier George had emailed to his siblings my latest essay "Anecdotes: Finding Meaning in Memories," in which I told, among other things, stories of our children when they were young. On March 3 my son Dave emailed me from his home in North Carolina saying, in part: I take humorous exception to one sentence about MaryBeth not being interested in "ordinary pets like cats and dogs." He went on to say that only one who did not have experience around cats and dogs would call them "ordinary." His family could write ten pages of stories about their 25 pound cat Hobbes, he said, and then proceeded to give me some samples. He also included a story about CJ, one of his sister Marty's cats.

I appreciated Dave's humor and emailed him back that when his family writes their book of cat stories, I had a funny one to contribute about Marty's cat Dude. This incident has brought me so much pleasure through the years! Instead of waiting for "Kwiatkowski's Book of Cat Tales" to come out, I'm going to share my story with you now and clear my head. I'm calling it –

### SURPRISE!

Marty and Ed have shared their home with from two to three cats at a time since early in their marriage, more than twenty years ago. What a variety of personalities the pets have had! Some of the cats have been afraid of children, since they have no daily contact with them. Such was the case with Dude, a beautiful gray cat living with them in 1997, the time of this story. Marty and Ed enjoy hosting family dinners. Among those attending Thanksgiving dinner that year were George and Janet with their three boys Eric (12), Evan (8) and Andrew (5) and MaryBeth and Charles Dyer with their seven month old son, John. All during the dinner Dude was in hiding.

Soon after the meal was over and the dishes had been washed, George and his family went home while the rest of us settled down in the living room to talk. John was sitting on a blanket on the floor, contentedly playing with his toys. I can't imagine how it happened, but somehow Dude knew that the boys had left. Relieved, he decided to leave his hiding place and socialize with the adults. I saw him happily trotting from the hall into the living room when suddenly – SURPRISE! Less than three feet away, Dude found himself looking into the eyes of – a CHILD! Both John and Dude froze into position, staring at each other. I could imagine Dude thinking, "How in the world am I going to get out of this predicament?"

And then – ever so carefully, without a sound, his eyes fixed on John – Dude began to creep slowly back, back, back, back until he reached the hall. Then he turned and ran away, full speed ahead! John returned to his playing and we to our talking. And I was left with a story that never fails to bring a smile to my heart. We would all do well to have a large supply of those!

**Friday, May 5, 2006.** This morning I got an email from my brother Bob saying that our mom is in a coma. Ninety-seven years old, she lives in the Lebanon Valley Brethren Home, Palmyra, PA. For the past couple years she has been unable to communicate in any way, yet I feel her life still had value (see my essay "Coming Full Circle"). I have not seen Mom since September, 2003 because of my own illness. If I were well, I would be on my way to Palmyra now, as Bob and Esther are. Instead, I'm in my room in Sky View trying to capture my thoughts on paper while they are still fresh. Again I am so thankful that I have the diary format essays in place for moments like this.

My dad died in April, 2000 in the same place where Mom lives. I was there when he died and was heavily involved in planning his funeral. I delivered a eulogy at the service, one that I wrote after he died. I expected to do the same for Mom. I realized some time ago that I might not be able to attend Mom's funeral; perhaps I would even die before my mother! So I wrote a paper of my recollections of Mom that could be handed out at the service and entrusted it to Marty. I'm so glad I did that!

I have always felt that dying while in a coma must be a peaceful kind of death. I would not be sorry if Mom slipped away from us that way. My mind now is focused on the joy she will experience when she opens her eyes in Heaven and on the coming reunion that we will have there. That does not stop my tears from overflowing their ducts at times. And I'm not going to waste my time trying to figure out why.

**Saturday, May 6, 2006.** All the time I was writing the above entry, Mom was already in Heaven; I just didn't know it. She breathed her last earthly breath about 11:15 in the morning, a few minutes after Bob and Esther arrived. Not wanting to send me the news by email, they contacted George and together they set up a plan for telling me in person. All afternoon I awaited an email update. When it didn't come, I assumed Mom was still in a coma and began looking forward to my regular Friday evening treat: a visit from George and Janet.

Shortly before 7:00 they came – with Marty! As soon as I saw Marty, I knew Mom had died and I burst into tears. My children closed the door as, since PLS, my crying can be quite noisy. Then followed a very intimate hour consisting of news, laughing, crying and anecdotes. We even handled some business matters concerning essays and finances, did a few housekeeping chores and Janet gave me a manicure. There was so much love in the room! Sometime after 8:00 Leo arrived, bringing more love. And then I was alone with the God of all comfort who gave me a good night's rest in his everlasting arms and has filled me with peace and joy today. I have no complaints!

**Wednesday, May 10, 2006.** Mom's funeral was yesterday and, of course, I was not there. On Monday I was trying to think how I would feel during the actual time of the viewing, service, burial and the gathering afterwards. Fortunately, before I got too bogged down in vain imaginings, I remembered that God's extra grace is made available when the need arises, not before. Having nothing to worry about, then, I had another good night's sleep.

I was peaceful and calm yesterday, even during the time of the viewing. At 1:30, when the service was beginning in Palmyra, I decided to attend the weekly meeting that we have here on the fourth floor with Diane, our social worker. On Monday I had wondered if I would be able to attend or if I would want to be alone. Diane asked me privately if I minded if she announced in the meeting that my mother died. I told her I'd rather she didn't, and she respected my wishes. In Palmyra George, Janet, Marty and Ed were representing our family – and me. Today visits from Marty, George and Janet plus earlier emails from them and Bob assured me all went well in Palmyra. Bob did something very special for me: he taped the service! I listened to it tonight. It was indeed God-honoring. All is well with my soul.

**Saturday, May 13, 2006.** George sent an email to his siblings about their grandma's funeral, along with a copy of my tribute that he read at the service. In the email he mentioned that someone at the gathering recalled that I had been their baby-sitter. Marty said the woman was Dot. That brought many happy memories to my mind. I am currently writing an essay called "Where Is Home?" in which I list the places where I have lived as a basis for my thoughts. Dot and her family were involved in two of the places we lived, so I had been thinking of them. Here are some details:

Part of the second floor of the house we bought on Church Street in Annville, PA in 1943 had been turned into an apartment with an outside entrance. My parents rented that apartment to a young couple named Dot and Jess, who were about to become parents themselves. A little boy named Jerry was born to them that summer, and I was thrilled! What could be finer for a ten year old girl than for her to have easy access to a baby?! Mom and I went up the wooden staircase together and separately in the months to come, she to help Dot and I to admire Jerry while getting to know his mother. Then we sold the house and moved back to our duplex on S. Lancaster St.

In 1947 my parents sold the vacant side of our double house to – Dot and Jess! It was a joyful reunion for me. In 1946 they had added Tommy to their family, the same year my parents gave me a second brother, Bobby. I was 14 when they moved next door – just the right age to be a baby-sitter! So often in the years to come I left my house, stepped over the banister that separated our porches, and tended Jerry and Tommy while Dot and Jess went out. The money I earned there helped put me through college.

As a child, I liked being around and talking with adults. In spending time with Dot and Jess, I learned to knit from her and to enjoy major league baseball from him. At the end of the 1940's the Phillies were becoming a strong team. When they won the national league pennant in 1950, for the first time in 35 years, Jess and I were elated! About five years ago I saw Dot and Jess at an Annville High School reunion and asked if I could take their picture. "Why?" Jess asked. "Because both of you were important in my growing up years," I answered as they posed. I felt satisfied, as if that moment brought everything full circle with them. Jess died within the past year; Dot attended Mom's funeral and mentioned my baby-sitting, adding a P.S. to my story. Precious relationships! Begun here. To be continued, in a different form and on a higher plane, There. Praise God!

**Thursday, May 18, 2006.** Last night, for the first time, I had a dream in which I was riding a power chair. I had wondered how long it would take for the reality to enter my subconscious mind, and now I know: more than 21 months. The dream was not entirely realistic, though; I was sometimes walking and sometimes riding, for one thing. Also I was riding along the edge of country roads, sharing space with cars and trucks, something I have never done nor desired to do. Besides that, I could talk normally. I have been using my Lightwriter to communicate for 11 months. I wonder when I will have a dream in which I cannot talk?

**Tuesday, May 23, 2006.** This date brings back memories every year, for on May 23 in 1951 I graduated from high school and exactly four years later I graduated from college. I've always enjoyed that coincidence. This week I received word that my Aunt Mary Jane Hicks died on May 18, her ninety-first birthday. Another converging of dates! Death, for a believer, is like a graduation. Our entire lives on earth are spent in God's school where we learn the basics about God, ourselves and others. Many variables determine how we progress in our studies, but sooner or later we "graduate".

Graduation from high school and college is both an ending and a beginning, and can be a bitter-sweet experience. I was sad when our school principal, Mr. Starr, told us that graduation night would be the last we would all be together. Only looking forward to college made the ceremony bearable. Four years later the thought that I was finally a school teacher with a job awaiting took some of the sting out of the partings. For a dying person I can well imagine the same bittersweet feelings. The date for the "graduation" has been set and cannot be avoided, but it involves separations that, even though temporary, may not be easy. Looking forward to the adventure of Heaven is a balm that can make the transition not only bearable, but exciting. Those who gather in a funeral home or around a grave can be compared to underclassmen witnessing a graduation ceremony: they are getting an idea of what is in store for them some day!

When I started writing this entry I only intended to write the first two sentences, just facts about the date. I have feasted on the thoughts that followed. Isn't it amazing how the mind works?

**Thursday, May 25, 2006.** Occasionally good friends will challenge my thinking and thus enlarge my borders. When Cliff was visiting recently, we shared a hearty laugh. For me the laughing soon turned into a coughing spell. Mucous was hanging from my nose and saliva ran down my chin and dripped onto my shirt. Loud, messy and repulsive – that's the way I felt. Finally I calmed down and

cleaned my face. Then I began to type on my Lightwriter. Even as I wrote I knew something was wrong with what I was expressing. I wished I could stop the sentence, but Cliff was reading the screen as I was typing. And so I pressed on: "Can you see why I prefer being alone to being around others?" I expected him to address the self-consciousness that I heard in my question. Instead he gave me much to ponder by saying, "You need to let us experience you as you are now." Oh! I'm sure I don't know yet the full implications of his statement, but I'm working on it. What do you think?

My friend Vallie read the essay "Welcome!" in which I mentioned the risk authors take of having their writings (and themselves) misunderstood by the readers. After she finished she sat there, essay in hand, as if composing her thoughts. Then she quietly said, "The only way to overcome that fear is to not care what anyone thinks of you or your writings except God. That's true freedom. Anything else is bondage." How right she is!

**Monday, May 29, 2006.** I decided a few weeks ago to conclude this essay at the end of May, and now the time has come. MaryBeth and Charles Dyer took advantage of this Memorial Day weekend to travel from Massachusetts with their sons John and Graham to visit with us. I wonder how it feels to our grandchildren to know that their grandparents live at two different places. I'm sure they can understand the reason for our separation but, still, it must seem strange. I have written much about my adjusting to my disabilities. It occurs to me now, more than ever, that every family member and every one of my friends has had to adjust to them also. All family gatherings and reunions of any sort are now held without the physical presence of Mom / Grandma / Verna. May God's grace be sufficient for all of us as we let go of what used to be and accept what is.

Memorial Day used to be on May 30 before it became a "last Monday in May" holiday. On May 30, 1946, when I was thirteen, my brother Bob was born. For several years, beginning when he was about two, Dad and I walked with Bobby to a spot in Annville where we could watch the Memorial Day parade pass by. What sticks in my memory like a clinker is the fact that I told my little brother the parade was in honor of his birthday! What was that, a harmless deception or a lie? It was a lie, of course. I don't think there is such a thing as a harmless deception; do you? Thank God that the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin!

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