

A PENNY FOR YOUR THOUGHTS - 6

January - March, 2007

Saturday, February 10, 2007. Almost two months have gone by since I wrote an entry in a Penny essay. Just this afternoon I told my daughter-in-law Janet that I had been lazy. As usual, she had a better explanation. "You are not lazy," she said. "You've been recuperating." There may be some truth in that. I was ill during the last two weeks of January, spending nine days lying in bed in the hospital. I'll write more about that later, but first I want to conclude a topic that I have postponed long enough: DREAMS.

I have been a vivid dreamer for as long as I can remember. The contents often amaze me, as they seem to be more creative than anything I can imagine while awake. After I completed the essay "Prepare the Way" last summer, I suddenly realized that the answer to many of my questions about dreams was contained in it. Listen to this paragraph:

"Recently I have been enjoying a new visualization of this vertical aspect of God's team. Picture the years piling up into a column with Adam and Eve's lifetime being on the bottom. The column is transparent enough that we can recognize some of the team members as the years climb upward. There's Noah, then Abraham and Sarah, and then Moses - and all of them alive! Continuing to gaze upward, we see Elijah and high up on top, there's Jesus! Now picture God putting his hand on top of the column and gently compressing it until everybody is at ground level, all contemporary. Doesn't it make perfect sense, then, to find Moses, Elijah and Jesus working together at the transfiguration?"

Once I got that concept in my mind, I soon had a mental picture of everyone I have ever known (or heard or read about) living together in my head at all the stages of their lives. Swirling around these people are the things I know about them plus everything else I have learned and experienced in my life. What a wealth of material my subconscious mind has to draw from when producing a dream! The possibilities are endless! Here are two examples from last year:

My son George, his son Andrew and I were preparing to perform a classical trio written for two accordions and a violin by Bettelmanns. (Is there such a composer? If so, I'm sure he did not write a trio for the instruments I mentioned!) Judging from the way we looked in my dream, I would say George was about 35, Andrew was his actual age of 14 and I was about 45. (Really, George is 48 and I am 73.) George and I were seated, playing full size accordions, and Andrew was standing between us. (In the past, George and I did play the accordion, though his was not full size. Andrew currently plays the violin.) Each of us had our own music stand; we were playing from the music, not from memory. An interesting feature of Bettelmann's trio is that George's part was written for the right hand (keyboard) only and mine was for the left hand (buttons) only, containing some intricate runs.

At this point we felt it would be helpful if someone with experience would listen to us play and give us tips. The person we chose was my sister-in-law Esther Ziegler. In my dream Esther sat in front of us and, with a copy of the music for reference, listened intently as we played for her. When we concluded, she had nothing to say to George; he had played very well. So had Andrew; she had only one bowing change to suggest to him. All of us considered Esther's comment and agreed that it was better her way. As for me, Esther pointed out a number of passages where I was careless in playing my part. She was absolutely correct! I had a lot of work to do before we would be ready to perform.

Let me tell you a bit about Esther. She was a nurse when she joined our family by marrying my brother Bob. After that she went to seminary and new careers opened up to her. Among other things, she was chaplain in a nursing home and a hospital, as well as pastor of various churches.

Everything Esther does, she does well. BUT SHE HAS HAD NO TRAINING IN MUSIC! If she had, I expect that she would excel in that field as well, certainly being able to perform the role she had in my dream.

In my second example, I was teaching a Sunday School class consisting of three high school girls: Esther (not my sister-in-law), Jessica and Angela. I saw the girls so clearly, all teenagers alive with energy. In truth, Esther is now a woman in her mid-fifties and Jessica and Angela are in their mid-twenties. I knew Esther when she was a girl and we were attending a church different from the one where I met the other two. Although I spent many years teaching Sunday School for all ages of children and adults, I NEVER HAD ANY OF THESE THREE WOMEN IN MY CLASSES!

The mechanics of these dreams now make sense to me. All the elements of the stories are alive within me, where time and space are of no consequence, just like eternity. When I sleep, my mind picks and chooses characters and information from the archives of my brain and spins them into the tale for the night. Now that I understand this basic structure, I can simply enjoy my dreams, rather than puzzling over their origins. Thank you, Lord!

Sunday, February 18, 2007. Today is one of the days I felt compelled to set aside working on essays to do what I call “necessary writing,” that is, answering emails on my mailbug or handling business matters on the computer. This morning an aide new to me falsely thought I was displeased with her service, so before she left I told her I would write to her. As I began to write, I realized the letter would also serve as a good entry for this essay, showing something of both my current physical condition and my daily routine. The aide was gone before I finished writing, but Carol, the nurse on duty, promised she would get my message to her. Here is the letter:

To my aide Alicia (not her real name):

Thanks for getting me out of bed and into my chair this morning. I can understand why you felt bad at times, but you really don't need to. I'm writing to explain why. You have not taken care of me often enough to learn the “language” I have developed to replace the voice that has been taken away by disease. I use this “language” when my little typing machine is not available to clarify my wishes. It consists of two main parts:

1. A system of signs, pointing and gesturing. Some are more obvious than others. A hand under my nose with a wiping gesture means I want tissues, for example.
2. A crying sound that I use as a warning that something is wrong. This is NOT real crying, though it looks and sounds like it. When I am really crying, there are tears and I cannot easily stop. When I make crying sounds as a way of talking, there are no tears and I stop as soon as I am understood or the “crisis” passes.

Here is what happened this morning:

1. While sitting on the edge of my bed, getting connected to the sara lift, I knew my right foot wasn't placed correctly on the platform and standing that way would be painful. I tried signs first. I patted my right leg, then pointed right. When that was not understood and you got ready to lift me, I used the crying sound. The aide who was there to help you moved my foot enough that I stopped the noise and let you lift me and move me to the bathroom.
2. When you were removing the diaper, you accidentally began to pull on my feeding tube. Immediately I began to “cry,” as it is very important that my tube not be pulled. Soon the diaper was off and I stopped “crying.”

3. When you began to lower me, I was still crooked because of my foot placement, so I was landing on the handle of the shower chair over the toilet. Of course I made the crying sound. You saw what was wrong and moved the lift so that I came down properly onto the shower chair seat.

4. When I was on the lift in front of my chair, you pulled up my slacks, but they were twisted. I wanted them straightened, not just for appearance (though that matters to me) but because they were uncomfortable. I am amazed that, even through a diaper, I can feel if my slacks are pulled up straight or crooked! My hands were holding the handles of the lift, so I could not gesture. So I "cried." You sat me down; I pointed to the seam; you lifted me back up, adjusted the slacks, and sat me comfortably in the chair. Good work!

Everything worked out well, Alicia. The only bad thing was that my "crying" made you feel bad. If you worked with me on a regular basis, you would soon learn what I need and want. Don't be afraid if you see me on your schedule again. I would be happy to see you. And after tending me today and reading this letter, you are already well on the way to learning my routines. I don't always "cry"!

God bless you, Alicia. Love, Verna (Sky View 413)

Monday, February 19, 2007. My first visitor today was Alicia! She smiled broadly, waved a paper and empty envelope and said, "I got your letter! Thank you." I waved and smiled back. Then she turned and left, still smiling beautifully. Yes, my writing yesterday was "necessary."

Tuesday, February 20, 2007. What a wonderful surprise I received Sunday morning while I was still in bed! A man crept into my room looking as though he didn't know if I would be happy to see him or not. I broke into a big smile that not only welcomed him, but also let me know I had come full circle with him. It was the aide who had taken care of me most of last year on the 3 to 11 pm shift. Let me bring you up to date.

In the Penny - 5 essay I mentioned my dismay at being taken off my regular aide's schedule without explanation. Several other residents were also removed. It was unbelievably hard for us to see him at work taking care of others, but not us. He wanted so much to have his old schedule back, but over five tense weeks went by with no change. Then I had my annual family conference at Sky View, attended by various department heads and my daughter Marty. When asked if I had any concerns, I brought up the situation with the aides. To the distress of all present, I began to cry. The next day, Friday December 29, the nurse manager and my former aide came into my room together, with welcome news. "Beginning Monday," the nurse said, "every day that he is working here, you will be on his schedule." What a way to start the New Year! All of us were happy.

Then just a few weeks later, he was unexpectedly absent two days in a row. He only worked five days a week, so I thought perhaps these were his days off. "Uh-oh," I thought when he was absent the next day as well. "Something has happened." And it had. A nurse explained that he had come to work, found an assignment waiting that he did not want, and abruptly quit. To my surprise, I took the news calmly. I knew he had some grievances here, plus he was often tired from working two jobs. Maybe this would turn out to be the best solution for him. In any event, I would accept it, as it was something I could not change.

And then, several weeks later, there he was at my bedside! He was making the rounds, visiting the residents from his schedule. He got me my Lightwriter and we chatted for a while. Then he left, not as my aide, but as a friend. And all was well with my soul.

Sunday, March 4, 2007. I promised you more information about my hospitalization in January. Here it is:

In the second week of January, a virus began going through Sky View, beginning on the fourth floor. Symptoms were vomiting and diarrhea. I remember how it started: "She's vomiting!" an aide said of a resident who was using one of two communal bathrooms on our floor. (In addition, we all have bathrooms in our private or double rooms.) The virus was highly contagious. A quarantine was attempted and staff members wore masks for a few days, but to no avail. Within a week all of Sky View was involved and many aides and nurses were sick as well. Fortunately, people seemed to recover after only a day or two in bed.

I avoided the virus for over a week, mostly, I think, because I stayed alone in my room as much as possible. Then in the very early hours of Friday, January 19, I woke up just in time to have the aides bring a basin to my bed. Oh, how I appreciated the aides on duty that night! They did not complain as they ministered to me over the next few hours while my stomach and bowels were both expelling their contents. Curiously, I had wondered how it would be to vomit with a feeding tube in my stomach; now, after 19 months, I was pleasantly surprised to find it was no different from before. Or so I thought!

Early Saturday, nearly 24 hours after my last episode, I began to vomit again. This time there was a big difference, for I was vomiting blood. A few hours later I was in an ambulance on my way to the hospital's emergency room. I was so impressed by the examining doctor in the ER. Quickly he assessed that during my vomiting my stomach lining had been damaged by the "mushroom" ending of my tube. He attached a pumping machine to the feeding tube and drew the rest of the blood out that way. Much better than throwing up, I must say!

The specialist that my internist sent to the ER said she would schedule an endoscopy for the next morning, as she wanted to see if I had a stomach ulcer. I knew then that I would be staying in the hospital at least one night. Never would I have dreamed it would be 9 days before I got back to Sky View! I do not have an ulcer, but other routine tests showed I did have pneumonia and a urinary infection. Both could have caused the low fever I was running. All these reasons, plus the hospital's policy of not discharging patients to nursing homes on weekends, added up to the long hospitalization.

Basically I did not feel sick during my stay. I enjoyed the visits from family and friends and watched television. AND I got a good taste of what it feels like to be bedfast, for the only time I was out of bed was on the 8th day, when I spent perhaps five hours in a recliner. I continued to find joy, even confined to bed. I was not surprised, for my Lord is with me wherever I go, whatever my circumstances. Praise his name!

Wednesday, March 7, 2007. At Sky View my venetian blinds are usually lowered and closed during the night, remaining that way until 10 or 11 in the morning. Several times recently three things converged: the shades were left up, I was propped on my left side in bed facing the eastern windows, and I woke up at just the right time to see "the dawn's early light." Yes, I thought of our national anthem, but more than that, I thought of the women who were on their way to the tomb to anoint the body of Jesus at that time of day. The gospel writers differ somewhat in their descriptions of the journey's onset ("at dawn," "just after sunrise," "very early in the morning," and "while it was still dark"), but all agree that it was EARLY. That's enough to impress me, a person who has ALWAYS liked to get up late. There were exceptions, of course: times when I either had to or wanted to get up early for the performance of a duty or the start of an adventure. I don't know the personal habits of the women in our story, but I do know that their bags of spices were packed and ready; they were eager to go as soon as possible.

The change from darkness through dawn to daylight is dramatic and, on a clear day, a real treat for the eyes. The many shades of gray, blue, pink and orange in the early morning sky serve as a fitting backdrop for the huge spectrum of emotions the women experienced in such a short time on that first day of the week. Sorrow surely filled their hearts as they started out on their mission which included a big obstacle: who would roll away the stone so they could enter the tomb and do their work? And then the darkness of their souls was replaced by shock after shock: the stone was already moved; the body of Jesus was gone; and angels were there instead, bringing them an incredible message! The writers describe the women as “alarmed,” “trembling and bewildered,” and “afraid yet filled with joy.”

Inside their brains the angelic message was causing memories to stir. Had Jesus really told them he would be raised on the third day? Why, yes, he had! They just had not understood what he meant. Jesus must have gone from death to life, from Night to Day! Jesus was alive! And with that truth Day replaced Night in their souls as well as in the skies. “Jesus has risen!” Glory, hallelujah! They would NEVER be the same. And neither will I.

SATURDAY, MARCH 31, 2007. With a miscellaneous entry, I have decided to bring this Penny essay to a close. The winter passed quickly with very little snow and ice. Of course, for me the weather doesn’t matter, as I spend most of the time indoors. And I am content with that. A resident asked me recently if I get lonely. She was surprised when I said no, but that’s the truth. I enjoy the life I have. Many interesting projects vie for my attention, some with deadlines that keep me going. The work of being an ambassador for Christ is always challenging and rewarding. Please don’t ever feel sorry for me. And when you pray for me, ask that the fruit of the Spirit may be seen in me, for the glory of God. Thanks.

Physically I still feel well, although PLS continues to shut down the use of my arms and legs. My vital signs are good and my digestive system works properly with the food I get through the feeding tube plus medication. I sleep well between the times that aides and nurses come to attend to me. My new chair has been modified somewhat, most recently by my daughter Marty, to make it more comfortable for me. I continue to enjoy the tilt feature. It seems so luxurious to tilt back and watch television, talk with friends or nap!

Right now I am looking forward to Thursday, April 5 when, Lord willing, we will have Scripture and Prayer with Verna and Friends in the Main Living Room here at Sky View. We will concentrate on the crucifixion of Jesus, making this our “Good Friday” service. Then on Sunday, April 8, again Lord willing, we will have an Easter Service with Verna and Family. My part must be done ahead of time and put into the hands of others. I have written sermons for both services plus a meditation for Easter. (You have already read the meditation; it is the March 7 entry in this essay.) I planned the entire Thursday service, incorporating materials I had written perhaps fifteen years ago on the sayings of Christ from the cross. George will organize the program for Easter. So now I have time to work on a project that has been weighing heavily on my mind for some time: completing the essay titled “Cleanse Me.”

I started writing “Cleanse Me” last summer and got to the end of part 1, the permanent cleansing that guarantees our salvation. Then I realized that I also needed to include the cleansing that maintains our daily fellowship with God. That’s a big subject! How could I keep it from becoming unwieldy? By concentrating on one area that really bothers me: filthy language coming from the mouths of believers. Does this bother you, too? Current examples kept the idea fresh in my mind even though I had stopped writing the essay. Here’s an example from the past two weeks:

One day I drove out of my room into the open lobby area on our floor where residents gather and where the nurses have their stations. The elevators are also there, so staff members, visitors and residents are often passing through the area. On this particular day the lobby was alive with

activity. A male nurse, who is fascinated by my Lightwriter, issued me a challenge: I want you to write down how you are and make it something unusual. So I typed "I am content." "Make it talk," he said. I pressed the talk button, letting all people with normal hearing in on the message. Then he announced to the gathering, "She is content because she has God in her life." I was surprised and wondered if this might be a brother in Christ.

A few days later I was in the same area when I overheard a staff member scoff at Christianity. The male nurse heard it too, and from across the lobby he immediately refuted the comment. Then on another occasion he came rushing over to me, big smile on his face, and said, "Write some curse words. I want to see if the machine will pronounce them." Of course I refused. Back in my room, I wondered what to do. What would you have done? Finally I wrote him the following note, deciding I would give it to him the next time he worked on our floor:

I do not curse; hence, my Lightwriter does not curse, either. I agree with James who said, "Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be (James 3:10)."

I want to save my mouth for praising God. I'm sure you can understand that.

Yesterday the opportunity came. He began to read and when he came to the Bible verse, he quoted it from memory. Just then a member of the recreation department came by. This woman, who has read a number of my essays, and the nurse began to talk with each other about me. Before long they were talking about God, the final judgment, forgiveness, grace and more. I drove back to my room, marveling at how the work of the Kingdom goes on and on and on and on - all the time, all over the world!

Take courage! Our labor in the Lord is not in vain!

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