

A PENNY FOR YOUR THOUGHTS – 9

OCTOBER – DECEMBER, 2007

Tuesday, October 9, 2007. As I typed the title for this edition of my journal, my mind was drawn simultaneously to the past and to the future. The “9” means I have completed two years of writing Penny essays, for I have written them so far at the rate of four a year. Two years ago I was living in a Drum Hill apartment with my husband Leo, not knowing that before we changed calendars I would be moving to a nursing home. The time has flown by for me! It’s been enjoyable, too.

As for the future, I’m not so much wondering about the next 3 months as I am about tomorrow. One week ago the date was set for me to get a new feeding tube on October 10. The procedure requires that I go to the Endoscopy section of the hospital and be put to sleep. This is not something I’m looking forward to, but I am looking forward to the result: a new tube. This week I used all the techniques I have written about in other essays as aids when facing unpleasant situations, and they worked. I expect to sleep well tonight. The aides will have me ready when the ambulance arrives at 6:30 in the morning. I don’t even have to set an alarm clock! And tomorrow my Lord will take hold of my right hand and say to me, “Don’t be afraid. I will help you.” I can count on that!

Wednesday, October 10, 2007. What a story I have to tell today! It’s far different from the one I imagined yesterday, and I will tell you at the beginning that I was pleased with the ending.

My night aides did have me ready when the men came with the stretcher to take me to Phelps Memorial Hospital. The trip was uneventful on this cloudy, rainy day. My daughter Marty met us at the hospital and soon I was lying in a bed in Endoscopy. A nurse came in with a sheaf of papers to go over with Marty, who serves as both power of attorney and health care proxy for me. One paper asked for common statistics: DOB, Ht, Wt, M/F, M/S... “M/S?” asked the puzzled nurse. “What’s M/S?” Marty was equally stumped and I certainly didn’t know. Then one of them said, “Oh! Married or Single!” and we all laughed at how obvious it seemed – once we knew! My laughter, however, was not normal, but was the noisy, uncontrollable kind that PLS has given me. All I had to do was think of the look of bewilderment on the faces of 3 women and I’d burst into another round of laughter! It was fun.

Then came the woman who was to prepare me for anesthesia. She went to my left hand, since my right arm was encircled with a “Do not use” pink band, and said “A little pinch” as she carefully inserted a child’s size needle into my small veins. It wasn’t bad. But then I felt a second pinch! When I looked, I found two band-aids on the back of my hand and no needle! “Both veins collapsed,” she said. “I don’t know what we’re going to do.”

After she left, the doctor arrived. He was the man who installed my tube a year ago, so he knew all about the “mushroom” that kept the tube anchored in my stomach. Marty presented to the doctor the list of concerns I had typed out for him. Rather than answer them, he countered with a proposal I found stunning: he said that at times he pulls the tube out from the abdominal opening and inserts the new tube immediately, eliminating the need for anesthesia and the endoscopic procedure. He said that when the old tube was withdrawn there would be a stinging sensation that would go away in a few seconds. One change would have to be made though: the new tube would have to be the balloon type, a kind that had given us problems in the past, mainly leakage. “The balloon type could be changed in my office or even bedside,” he added.

I listened to Marty’s questions, and then had a final one of my own: what would the doctor recommend? I knew from my past experiences with him that I could trust him to be prudent. When he said he would be willing to try the shortcut, I readily gave my approval and a sense of adventure prevailed. “I’m going to ask you to step outside,” he said to Marty and then – in less than five minutes! – the process was completed! The discomfort was exactly as the doctor had predicted! It was

uncanny. After Marty returned, the doctor turned to me and said, "Now that you know what it's like, would you have made the same choice?" I smiled and vigorously nodded yes!

Then there was nothing left to do but return home. I was back in my bed at 10:30 AM. At 11:15 my aide came in to get me up for the day, just as usual. Amazing! Thank you, Lord.

Saturday, October 13, 2007. Not everyone who says they will come back to visit actually returns. That's what helped make a visit I had last evening so special. Andrea, my reflexologist, was working on my feet when a knock came on my open door. "May I come in to say hello?" a woman asked Andrea, who of course said yes. To my delight, in came Meisha! Remember her? She's the former social work intern that I wrote about in Penny 7. Meisha said she read the essays I gave her and told the members of her church my testimony. When she asked what was new with me, I typed the word "website." How her face brightened! She took the slip of paper that contained my web address, promising she would distribute it among her friends. I believe she will!

Monday, October 22, 2007. What an unusual autumn we are having! Like last year, the leaves on the trees outside my windows and on the distant hills are still basically green, with just a hint that they are going to change. Perhaps it's a new trend; we'll have to wait until next year to see. It has also been unusually warm. At Sky View the air conditioning system has been turned off, so the only way to cool the room is to open the window and hope that a breeze is blowing. Right now it's 8:45 PM and my room is very comfortable, with night air coming in at a delightful rate.

Of the six large panes of window glass that we have in each room here, only the lower panel of the middle set opens. Until last summer, the mechanism on the window allowed it to open quite wide, sometimes wide enough to cause problems. Then came the day when the maintenance men came into each room and in just a few minutes installed chains that restricted the opening to about 6 inches at the widest point.

One of the reasons I keep writing the Penny essays is to record the progress of my neurological disease, primary lateral sclerosis (PLS). My restricted window serves as an apt metaphor for what is happening to my arms lately. These arms, which used to open wide, had in the past few years become increasingly limited in their range of motion. But in the past week there has been such an acceleration in the process that I feel as though someone irrevocably shortened the chains on my arms. Then comes the question: Is that OK with you? Answer: Of course it is! (See my essay "The Answer Is Yes; What Is the Question?")

Saturday, November 10, 2007. This afternoon I went to the Main Living Room on the first floor to take part in a game called Word Breakdown. Before PLS damaged my ability to write, I used to do various kinds of word games almost every day, both for enjoyment and to keep my mind sharp. I still try to challenge my brain, but in ways that do not involve pencil and paper. My flair for solving cryptograms, for example, has diminished to watching "Wheel of Fortune" on TV to see if I can solve the puzzles before the contestants do.

Word Breakdown consists of making words out of the letters contained in a long word. With my former capability, I sometimes played this game as printed in the NY Post newspaper. There is a new word daily, along with the number of 5-letter words that you are to try to find in that word. You may not use double letters unless two of that letter appear in the word, nor may you use capitalized words. Also appearing in the paper is the word from the day before, with the 5-letter words listed in columns. I was always so happy when I found a word that was not in the paper!

At Sky View the word is written on a whiteboard and then the listing begins. Words with 3 letters or more are accepted. Various mistakes, like duplication or using letters that are not in the word, are made as the lists sometimes approach 100 words. I had to deal with these problems internally by

asking myself hard questions: Can I enjoy myself in spite of the mistakes? Or should I leave? Am I being helpful here or am I spoiling the fun of others? Must I stick by the rules or can I be flexible? Can I find pleasure in seeing others find pleasure?

The last question was prompted by an incident from today. One of the newest members of our activities department was in charge. When a man from our group called out a 2-letter word, she paused to consider it and then wrote it down, saying she thought 2-letter words were OK. The man was so pleased and added several more words of the same size to the list. I decided to wait until the game was over and then tell the staff member privately that it is not good to accept 2-letter words; but when the time came, the image of the man's smiling face was so strong that I couldn't do it. I am the one who must change if I want to continue playing word games at Sky View.

Today I did something different. Our words were HYPHENATION and WASHINGTON. When I got back to my room, I put the words on my computer and played the game with my own set of rules: Words must have 5 or more letters, no capitalizations, no plurals, use only letters appearing in the word. Want to play with me under these rules? If so, I challenge you to find at least 25 words from both HYPHENATION and WASHINGTON. I will put my answers at the end of this essay. Have fun!

Sunday, November 18, 2007. I continue to attend the Tuesday afternoon meetings conducted on the 4th floor by Diane, our social worker. On Nov. 6 Violet was upset because a personal blanket of hers had been sent to the laundry and never came back. As Diane explained that this was not unusual, I began to feel guilty about a matter that had bothered me off and on for at least a year. So that Friday I wrote this note:

To Diane

From Verna

Re afghan

When Violet told of her missing blanket on Tuesday, I knew I had to tell you about the afghan in my room.

About a year ago I was cold during the night & asked for a blanket. A nurse came back with a lovely hand crocheted afghan and said, "There are no more Sky View blankets on the floor, but this afghan was in the closet. It has no name on it." Well, that afghan has remained in my room ever since that day.

Any chance we could get it back to its owner??

Diane wasn't at work that Friday, but on Monday, Nov. 12, I handed her the letter. She read it and calmly replied, "It's possible that it didn't belong to anyone in particular. Sometimes people in the community donate items like that to Sky View to be used where needed. I'll send up Nuno from housekeeping to take a look." I was stunned! Perhaps all those guilty feelings had been needless! Nuno came, looked the afghan over, and said, "You're right, there's no name. And no one has reported a missing afghan. Do you want it?" I nodded, and just that quickly the afghan became mine!

And that was that – except for this: Why didn't I try to return it sooner? It's true that everything is a big chore for me now, but part of the truth is: I liked it and wanted to keep it. Has anything like that ever happened to you? What did you do about it? I have no excuse for my behavior. My advice to myself and others is this: If your conscience is bothering you, handle the matter quickly!

Monday, November 19, 2007. I am expecting company this afternoon; in fact, this whole week should be filled with family visits. The Thanksgiving holiday, just 3 days away, is the reason the family is gathering now. Our California son Paul and his wife Marita, along with their 3 children:

Sophia (16), Amanda (14), and Robert (13), were to have arrived in NYC at midnight last night and then gone to George's house to sleep. They are the ones I am expecting today. They plan to stay until early Saturday morning. Then Thursday morning our Massachusetts daughter MaryBeth expects to come with her husband Charles and their sons John (10) and Graham (8), staying until Saturday afternoon. Eric and Evan will be coming home from college to visit their parents, George and Janet, and their brother Andrew (15). Marty and Ed will be at home until Friday, and plan to host one of two dinners in our area* on Thanksgiving Day. The other will be at George and Janet's house, and the guests will be members of Janet's family. I will remain at Sky View throughout the week, hosting visitors as they come in various groupings – and I will be thankful!

*The reason I said "in our area" is that our son David, his wife Dana, and their children Paul (home from college), John, and Amy will be giving thanks in North Carolina, their home state. We will be joined in heart.

Wednesday, November 21, 2007. The visiting started Monday and it has been wonderful!

Lately my mind has been going back to events that occurred 3 years ago. Starting in the late summer, 2004, when I was living with Leo at Drum Hill, I began the process of blessing my grandchildren by giving them each a legacy, both monetary and spiritual, and by talking with them frankly about my condition. They came in groups, just as they are doing now, but between August and November I saw all 11 of my children's children. To the last group I remember saying with my waning voice, "I don't know if I have 3 months to live or 3 years. If I find out anything, I'll let you know." Now the 3 years have passed and I am still here! I guess it would be best to live each day to the fullest, and let death come when it will. The important thing is to be prepared, and I am! Are you?

Thursday, November 22, 2007. Today is Thanksgiving Day, and indeed I am thankful. I was in bed all morning, so I got to watch the entire Macy's annual parade. My aide had me dressed and in my chair around 1:30. I pictured dinner about to start at Marty's house and knew George's house would be awash with activity. Knowing that company would probably be coming later, I decided to relax during the afternoon. First I went downstairs, where the daughter of a resident was playing the piano for our enjoyment. Then, back in my room, I made a game of seeing how many words with at least five letters I could find in the word THANKSGIVING (I will list these words, too, at the end of this essay, in case you want to play the game with me). And I envisioned – happily – the gatherings of my loved ones.

Besides dinner and visiting, another activity was taking place at Marty's house: a partial distribution of my jewelry. Last week Janet and Marty located my jewelry and brought it to me so I could pick out what I wanted to keep. Marty cleaned all the pieces (a massive job!) and got them ready for display. While still in Drum Hill I gave Dana and Amy a large selection of my earrings; now all the rest of the females in my family could take what they wanted. Some tears flowed as I recounted to Marty the stories behind some of the pieces, but I had initiated this project and I was happy to see it moving forward. Later in the evening my granddaughters came to visit, each wearing some of the jewelry. Even Paul showed me a small wooden cross that he had found in the collection and took for himself. All this made me glad!

Sunday, November 25, 2007. What a different day this has been! The hand of God is all over it, and my cup overflows! I was lying in bed enjoying some delicious thoughts left over from last week (See! I have leftovers too!) and waiting for Dr. David Jeremiah's program to come on TV, when my aide came in, 2 to 3 hours earlier than usual, to get me up for the day! I was dressed and in my chair before 10:30! Having missed my regular sermon, I tuned in to a preacher I have rarely heard and listened as he gave a marvelous sermon about our being branches whose job it is to remain attached to Jesus, who is the vine. If we abide in him, we will be fruitful, while undergoing pruning at times to make us more fruitful. The speaker thought the main kind of fruit developed by believers who abide in Jesus is the fruit of the Spirit, with its 9 characteristics as listed by Paul in Galatians 5:22,23.

The preacher thought that all the characteristics could be found in some unbelievers as well, except joy. He made it clear that connection with Jesus was necessary in order to live a joyful life.

Also on my mind lately has been the need to prepare the service for December. I wanted it to include a new creative piece about the Incarnation, but was not sure where to begin. My Bible lay open on my desk to Hebrews 3, a passage I had been studying. After the sermon, I went to my desk to handle some paper work and in so doing, a page of the Bible flipped over to Hebrews 1. I took a look and immediately recognized that this would be perfect as a base for my creative piece! When I noticed the mention of God's anointing Jesus with the "oil of joy," that joy spilled all over me. Can you see as clearly as I can that God, who knew just what I needed, arranged my morning in such a way that I would catch him speaking to me? Glory be to my faithful God!

Monday, December 3, 2007. Yesterday we had our first storm of this winter season. The roads were treacherous with both ice and snow, while the landscape was beautifully coated in white. On the ledge outside my window I saw an amusing sight: a large crow landed on the surface and promptly sank to its knees in the soft snow. The few steps it took before giving up and flying away were very stilted, reminding me of how hard it was to walk in knee deep snow as children, with our snow pants and galoshes on as protection. The crow came back today and looked much more comfortable as it strutted along the snow-free ledge!

Sunday, December 9, 2007. Instead of taking on extra projects for Christmas (cards, gifts), I've decided to make the rest of this month a time to catch up on unfinished business, hoping to start writing afresh in January, Lord willing. Many of the tasks I want to complete involve some writing, and I'm glad. I do not take for granted the fact that I can still type.

I'm still processing all the wonderful family times I had Thanksgiving week. My mind reviews conversations, while my mind's eye sees various scenes featuring the beautiful faces of my Dear Ones. For example, after reading my poem Counting My Blessings, and noticing the verse at the end: "Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus," Paul said, "Anyone who can't find anything to be thankful for has forgotten what we used to be and has no idea what Jesus Christ has done for us." How true! I wanted to remember that until I could write it down, so I had to review it often. In doing so, I came to realize that God had given me, through my son, a good way to answer a very legitimate question that many believers have about that verse: HOW can we give thanks in ALL circumstances? (Notice that the Scripture says IN all circumstances, not FOR all circumstances.) No matter what is happening at the moment, we can train ourselves to remember with gratitude that we belong to God, who loves us with an everlasting love so deep that he was willing to die an unspeakably cruel, humiliating death to provide for our salvation, without which we would be doomed to eternal separation from him. THANK YOU, LORD!

Thursday, December 13, 2007. We are being blanketed with snow as I write this. How beautiful it is! From my perch 4 floors above ground level I also hear a snow plow at work, reminding me of the dangerous side of snow. I'm so glad I don't have to drive anymore!

Last week I got word that my annual Comprehensive Care Plan meeting would be held this morning. Marty immediately volunteered to be the family representative at the meeting, and together we began to prepare. This is a great opportunity to ask questions and to process information about my care. I certainly wanted to have my list ready! As I sat before the computer trying to organize my concerns, a different thought came to me: Why not write a paper about the things I like at Sky View, so the meeting will open on a very positive note? This morning, when Diane, my social worker; Beth, nurse manager on the 4th floor; Mary Lou, nutritionist; and Gloria, from activities came into our meeting room, Marty handed each a paper on which was written:

Meeting for Dec. 13, 2007.

To those at my Comprehensive Care Plan meeting:

After 2 years, I am still happy to be living at Sky View. My family did a fine job of picking out a facility and a room for me. I will mention just 3 areas that I like:

1. Cleanliness. I really appreciate having 2 showers and shampoos a week. With all the washing that goes on between showers, I always feel like my body is clean.
2. Socialization. I have always been a person who is happy both alone and with other people. At Sky View I spend a lot of time in my room, watching videos, DVDs and TV when I am in bed and writing on the computer when I am in my chair. But when I need or want to mingle, opportunities are always there, outside my door. I like the freedom to drive my chair from the 4th floor to the 1st almost any time I wish.
3. Services. I am so happy to be able to present through the Activities Department the monthly Scripture and Prayer with Verna and Friends and the occasional Service with Verna and Family. My friends and family love to come here to present the services, but we have to depend on staff to make the loud speaker announcements and to bring people down, and that they do. Thanks!

Gratefully, Verna 413

All of them read the paper silently. What I found interesting was their reactions. Each one broke into smiles, genuinely pleased with the compliments. What a wonderful atmosphere that letter set for the rest of the meeting! There was a relaxation that lasted even when we were discussing heavy subjects. And that brings me back to an idea that I had a couple weeks ago and then set aside.

Have you seen the movie Pay It Forward? In it, a seventh grade teacher assigns his students to develop and put into practice a plan that will change the world. One boy comes up with the idea of helping three needy people who, instead of paying you back, "pay it forward" by helping three other needy people. In the movie, this was the start of a movement filled with possibilities.

Hebrews 3:13 says: *Encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.* From this I gather that all of us need encouragement and all of us should be giving encouragement – daily! – so that our hearts may remain soft toward God and others. I think a genuine spoken or written compliment is a wonderful encouragement tool that, if used deliberately, could transform homes, schools, churches, workplaces, even towns from places of drudgery into places of delight. If this is sparking your interest, please help me with the details. Shall we suggest that each participant give compliments to at least three different people a day? Under what circumstances should we tell the recipients what we are doing and ask them to join in the venture? Should we let each unit make up its own rules rather than try to be uniform?

As we give compliments, we may also receive them. If you have trouble with that, make it a priority to hone your receiving skills along with your giving skills until you are comfortable with both. Keep in mind that, besides changing our environment, we are serving the Lord our God when we become encouragers. If any of you tries this experiment, let me know, through my website, what happens. Thank you.

Monday, December 17, 2007. Time for a catch up entry. On Friday, November 30, Carolyn and I went to Drum Hill for a visit. What a good time we had talking with my friends, most of whom attended the worship services we used to have there every Friday evening. They still talk about and

miss those services. Carolyn handed out copies of my essay "To This Day" and the poem "Counting My Blessings". I figured that was as close as I could come to having a service with them.

Speaking of services, the one at Sky View on December 6 (1st Thursday) was especially well attended, possibly because there was another program scheduled to begin shortly after ours ended. I would say a quarter to a third of the residents who come to our services come under their own power, either walking, riding chairs such as mine, or self-propelling their regular wheel chairs. The rest must be brought there one at a time by staff members. When we are all assembled, including my friends from the outside, we are a congregation for a half hour to 40 minutes. All glory to God!

Puzzles and games such as word breakdown can become addictive, if we are not careful. A couple weeks ago I decided to see how many words of 5 letters or more I could find in CHRISTMAS DAY and NEW YEAR'S EVE. The answers to both are at the end!

Sunday, December 30, 2007. Once again the time has come to close another Penny essay. I've decided to use 3 quotations from emails in this, my last entry of 2007. The first came from my friend Trude. It said: "Life isn't about waiting for the storm to pass; it's about learning to dance in the rain." I like that! We have quite a few people at Sky View who are "dancing" in the rain. They inspire me!

The second is from my daughter MaryBeth Dyer, who has had many fascinating opportunities open up to her in the past couple years, including that of becoming a substitute teacher in the school her sons attend. I told her I hoped she would enjoy teaching as much as I always did. She wrote back that she did, much to her surprise and delight. She concluded with this: "Aging is certainly a discovery process!!" Anyone who can write that and punctuate it with 2 exclamation points is going to have no problem with ageing. I agree with MaryBeth; I am still discovering!

The third is from an article sent by my friend Linda about Itzhak Perlman, the violinist who wears leg braces and uses crutches due to having polio in childhood. In a concert about 12 years ago, near the beginning of a piece in which he was soloing with an orchestra, one of the strings on his violin broke. Rather than stop and replace the string, Itzhak motioned to the conductor to continue. He played the entire piece on the remaining 3 strings, making the required adjustments as he went along. After thunderous applause, Itzhak said, "You know, sometimes it is the artist's task to find out how much music you can still make with what you have left." What a beautiful way to handle the limitations that come due to accident, illness or ageing! That statement has all sorts of applications, no matter what our age.

Yesterday marked the second year anniversary of my arrival at Sky View. Tomorrow I will close my old calendar and begin writing on the new. All that remains is for me to record my New Year's wish for you:

MAY THE GOD OF HOPE FILL YOU WITH ALL JOY AND PEACE AS YOU TRUST IN HIM, SO THAT YOU MAY OVERFLOW WITH HOPE BY THE POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT (Romans 15:13).

Amen!

Answers to word games. The words in ordinary print are the ones I found. The ones in italics were found mainly by Marita (good job!), with help from Sophia and Marty. It was fun having them as partners! I like that much better than playing competitively.

HYPHENATION Vowels: A E I O Y
Consonants: H N N P T

hyphen nation phone paint point phony peony penny tinny anoint henna inept annoy
python pithy atone inane innate thine pinto pointy honey piano
ninety hyena patio hatpin piety pantheon panty

WASHINGTON A I O
W S H G T N N

thing swing sting owing awning stain washing thong nation hoist ghost gnash night sight
owning swain shown atoning
*towing sowing sawing toning anoint wanting wanton stoning honing twang waist wasting
waging nothing*

NOTE: Sophia asked me if verb forms ending with "s" are acceptable, as they are not plurals. I had not thought of that, but said yes. "Gnaws" would be a case in point. Now maybe you can get more!

THANKSGIVING A I I
N N G G T H S V K

thank(ing) giving stank stink(ing) sting(ing) stain(ing) thing think(ing) gnash(ing) night knight
sight(ing) giant shaving having saving gaining singing shank sinking aging knish
staging skating asking skiing

CHRISTMAS DAY I A A Y
S S C H R T M D

diary dairy smart misty hasty chart amass yacht crass march staid daisy stash scam
drama charm hairy tiara stray itchy ditch trash smash crash scary triad chair stairs chasm
(Verb forms): casts harms charms raids chats stays crams

NEW YEAR'S EVE E E E E A Y
N W R S V

weary never weave weaver sever every swerve seven nerve yearn sneer verse raven
renew swear answer sewer newer
(Verb forms): yawns wears veers nears avers evens weans