

Mom Moments

A Daughter's Journal

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Tia Ciferno

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May our Lord continue to pour His Life through you, and may there be fruit from your sacrifice.



The Brunetti Family

*Top row: Dad (Fred) and Mom (Marcia)
Middle Row: Sean, Greg, and Tia
Bottom Row: Kate, Maria, and Tami*

Preface

"If my people would but listen to Me, if Israel would follow My ways ...with honey from the rock I would satisfy you."

Psalm 81:13 and 15

It was a warm autumn morning when I sat in my car with my Bible and my journal by little Lake Anne and first read this verse. At that time my heart was breaking with the pain of watching my mother's day to day walk through the struggle of a terminal illness. But there in that scripture I heard the Lord speak a promise to our family, and in the months that followed we watched as that promise unfolded before us.

These writings are journal excerpts that tell a story of "honey from a rock"...God's Sweetness in the hard times. That rock in our lives was cancer...seemingly obtrusive, immovable, and unfruitful. But as we listened carefully for the Lord's Voice and followed His Ways, He proved this Promise to be real to us, and we found the precious and valuable hidden there in our darkest days.

These journal entries were written during my mother's last months with us. I've organized them into this book with the prayer that in these pages you'll discover the sweetness that we found in those months of "loving on" someone we knew was leaving us soon.

* * *

First, I'd like to make you familiar with some of the people you'll meet in these pages (*at the time of this journaling*).

You'll be reading about my parents, Fred and Marci, and my siblings; Greg, Sean, Tami, Maria and Kate.

I'm the oldest, and my husband Mike and I live just a mile from my parent's home. We have four children. At the time of this journaling Michael was twenty-two, Aaron was seventeen, Anna was fourteen and Julia was eleven.

My brother Greg and his wife, Tanya, lived near Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Greg graduated from the Naval Academy and spent years in Naval Intelligence.

Next in line is my brother Sean, who is less than a year younger than Greg. He was stationed in Wisconsin with his wife Darlene and their three daughters, Fasha, Jayna and Eva. Sean is a Lieutenant Colonel in the United States Army.

My sister Tami is married to Mark and they are the parents of Rachel, Daniel, and Baby Jake, who was born the same month that we were told of our mother's cancer. They make their home in Columbus, Ohio where Tami

had worked for ten years as a graphic artist but is now enjoying life as a full-time mom.

My younger sister Maria lived here in town with her thirteen year old son, Isaac, who was born on his grandma's birthday in 1989. "Ria" was the baby of the family for sixteen years until Kate arrived.

Kate, the youngest of us all, was still living at home during mom's illness. She had been accepted at the "college of her dreams" in New York City, but turned down the opportunity so she could stay close to home while Mom was sick. She attended a local university in those months.

I also want to introduce you to my parent's dogs. My mom loved them both so much, and they appear in these journal entries many times! Max is a huge, old, lovable Golden Retriever who greets every visitor with a bit of slobber and a lot of affection. His best friend is a small, wiry, and mischievous Jack Russell Terrier named Elliot.

Like all families, we've been through many rough waters. When Mom suffered a brain aneurysm ten years ago, my son Michael was there in her living room as his grandmother cried out, "Lord, help me live...*for my Kate.*" Kate was only nine years old at the time.

God answered my mother's desperate prayer. Our family solidified as we lived and prayed through a coma that lasted almost two weeks, three brain surgeries and extensive rehabilitation. The Lord provided a loving family and His healing touch, and Mom was eventually

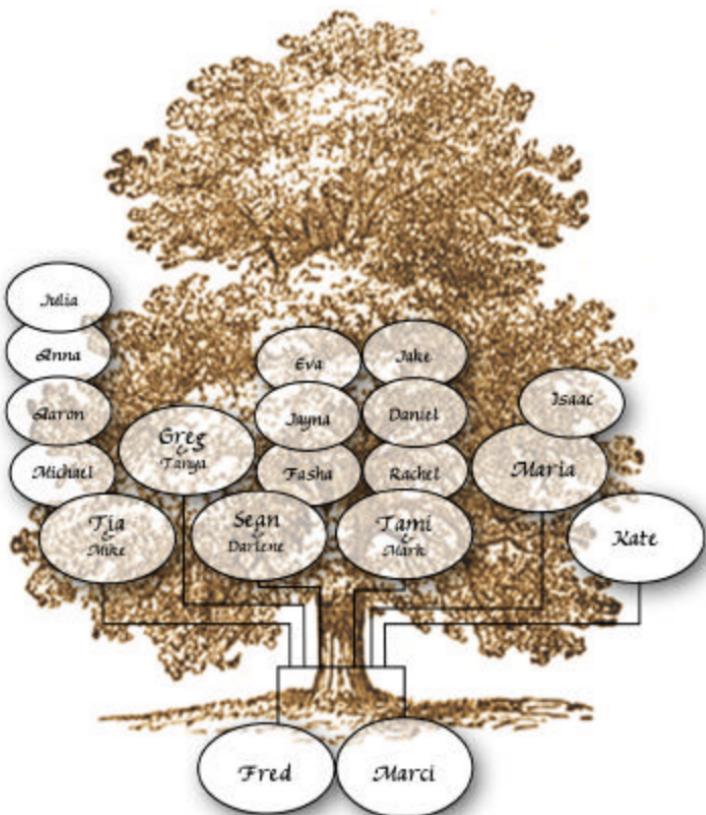
back home to be Fred's wife, mother again to all of us, and grandma to five little ones. She was grateful, most of all, to be alive to raise "her Kate".

The ordeal left my mother's right side paralyzed, but she was always a fighter, and her courage compelled her to become quite independent again. Mom was changed in many ways because of her brain injury, and we came to realize that there was a part of her that we would never see again until Heaven. For that we grieved, but we were *tremendously* grateful that she was still with us. We had the wondrous gift of ten more years of her smile, her wit, her love and her coffee. Love kept her here, and those next ten years were different, but they were sweet. Kate grew and matured until the day came when she finished high school, and it was only a few days after we celebrated her graduation that we learned of mom's diagnosis of terminal lung cancer.

I would also like to emphasize that this book isn't being shared to support any one type of cancer treatment over another. And it is not meant to deny the Lord's ability or willingness to heal, or to judge the faith of those who are not healed here on this earth.

It *is* meant to give one family's story of their walk through a dark and frightening disease, and the way the God of the Universe poured His Mercy and Miracles and Hope...His Honey...into every measured moment.

Our Family Tree





*God is my refuge and strength,
an ever-present help in time of trouble.*

Psalm 46:1

July 18th

Mom will have her news any day now...it's our news, too. She first showed me that lump on her neck the day of Kate's Graduation party, and now we're anxious to hear the results of the biopsy. She said she doesn't want to wait until next week, and that's she's going to call the doctor herself to find out what the tests results are.

I asked her, "You don't want to wait?"

She answered, "No, would you?"

* * *

Lord, deepen her faith, and strengthen her hold on You, as I know You have been holding *her*. Help us all today. I feel such a deep melancholy that it's not easy to work or to think of anything else.

But I know Mom doesn't want us to hover over her and sit and pout. I can bless her most by getting my own home in order, so that I'm even more available to give if she needs me.

That same night~3 am

Instead of being an ocean away, or behind a high and impassable stone wall, the door from here to Eternity is beside us... as near as our breath, and as thin as vapor.

Mom's doctor called her today. It was not what we wanted to hear. He gave her six months.

Oh, Father, be with her now I pray, in these dark hours when her house is silent. How can she possibly handle the news that she only has months left here on this earth? Be with her, Strong God. I ask that You quiet her heart, her fears, and her mind, and give her sweet sleep.

* * *

Tonight we all gathered at the house and spent hours talking and crying and comforting each other.

Mom sat at the kitchen table and whispered, "I can't believe it's happening to *me!*"

July 19th

I just found a prayer in the back of an old 1942 Army-Navy hymnal with no author's name, just a line before it in capital letters that reads~

"BEFORE YOU LEAVE THE CHAPEL"

It will be my prayer for Mom. I put a melody to it, and now I can sing it to You, Lord, all day long... for I will never leave the chapel of Your Presence.

Sabbath Prayer

*Lord Jesus, Thou hast known
A mother's love and tender care
And Thou wilt hear while for my own mother dear
I make this Sabbath prayer*

*Protect her life I pray
The one who gave her life for me
And may she know from day to day the deepening glow
Of joy that comes from Thee*

*I cannot pay my debt
For all the love that she has given
But Thou, Love's Lord, wilt not forget her due reward
Bless her in earth and Heaven*

Amen



July 20th

Lord, I run to You this morning, and I call out Your Name, “El Shaddai! All-Sufficient One!”

There's work to be done in our hearts. One moment at a time You will do it, as we surrender. Help me to embrace each circumstance as Your tool. Help me to pray with all my heart, and hide in You, so I can be Your vessel to those in my Story. How I love them all, and how I long to love them even more.

You will teach me, and there will be times when Your glory and Your Person shine more brightly than we've ever experienced. Opportunities, open doors, open hearts....so many are questioning in a time like this, ready to hear and find *You* in the midst of it all. You will hold back no good thing. I trust You to be more than enough.

Those that seek the Lord shall not be in need of any good thing.
Psalm 34:10

They gathered manna every morning. Ex. 16:21

Thank You for reminding me again. I tried to live yesterday without manna, without gathering strength and nourishment from You. But You are so generous. You are offering Yourself again...in this moment, so ready with showers of love and provision.

* * *

Visiting Mom last night was a delight. I am seeing more depth and uniqueness in her than I have ever noticed before. It's almost as if a fog has lifted.

Yesterday she said, "Maybe the doctors made a mistake. Maybe they're wrong."

July 22nd

Our little robin is perched on the curtain rod of my kitchen window, trying to get her feathers unruffled.

That's why I'm here too, Lord, writing to You.

I've spent hours this week watching this robin. I'm wondering if she's allergic to her own feathers because every time she preens herself, she has a sneezing fit.

Julia found "Petri" hopping frantically away from a pursuing cat, and she rescued her. Our home hasn't been the same since she's been here...what joy she's brought to us! I love her fluttery landings on our heads, her sweet, contented chirps after we feed her, and the way she perches on the curtain rod and looks out the kitchen window all day, listening to other birds. I wonder if she's

longing to join them in flight.

For now, she can only perch there by the window for hours on end, blocked by the screen and trapped in our world.

And ours is a world that is not conducive to flying; our creatures lumber along, locked to the earth, eating and moving and living so much differently than she does. Her freedom, her very life, is really beyond her reach, but I think she knows it's there. And she waits.

Sounds like us....waiting for Heaven, our Real Home. We're foreigners here too, and something tells us that we were made for more.

Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands.

2 Corinthians 5:1

July 27th

Julia let her robin go. It wasn't easy for her. After she watched her fly away, she climbed the towering pine tree in our backyard to follow the bird, and then as Petri happily flew around, Julia frantically climbed down from the great pine and ran from tree to tree trying not to lose sight of her. Finally, she offered Petri some food and she came to eat from Julia's outstretched hands. Then, after all that drama, she brought that robin back into our house! I made the decision that Julia and I should talk.

We discussed the joy and expanse of Petri's outside world...the importance of her freedom to be a bird, and, though we loved her dearly, the "real love" that would choose to let her go. Tears followed, and then a decision on her own a little while later.

Julia approached me, lifted her brown eyes to mine and said, "We can set her free."



Love never fails...

1 Corinthians 13:8

July 29th

These past few days have brought me the priceless gifts of many conversations with my mom on her porch. I sat on the old wooden swing and she relaxed on her white wicker chair as we took the luxury of some moments to chat in the middle of the balmy summer days. I've been drinking in every word, every expression, and every moment.

We were talking today about all the pets she's had in her life. She told me that our first dog, a small red Boarder collie, was the best dog we'd ever had. When "Prinny" grew older, she lost "control," so Mom invented a custom made doggie-diaper for her. I remember how her auburn tail wagged happily through the hole Mom had cut in the back of it.

She was also remembering the trauma of finally scheduling her seventeen year old pet to be put to sleep,

but Prinny died the night before that appointment.

Mom said she was so glad that Prinny chose her own time.

* * *

Mom also talked to me about her childhood, and how difficult it was for her when her mom had to pull her out of the Catholic school she had attended all her life. Grandma could no longer afford the tuition at the high school. It was seven dollars a month.

"Imagine that," she said.

* * *

Then she discussed the CT scan she had that day, and how many problems the nurse was having with her IV.

"I said 'Ow!' a couple of times."

She said the girl was very nice. "But she talked about having salad for lunch. Imagine, I'm having a CT scan of my brain, and she's talking about salad!"

August 1st

It was a difficult visit tonight. I am thinking of Mom *all* the time, but there is such a pull to be with her at certain moments. Tonight the urge to see her overwhelmed me as I was on my way home from picking up Julia from Maria's. I had groceries melting in the van, but it was the first day in so long that I hadn't been there, and Mom sounded quite subdued on the phone, so I stopped.

I walked into the house and there she was, sitting alone in the living room with a blanket on her legs, a TV tray in front of her with a bowl of her half-eaten chicken soup on it, and a sad, concerned look on her face. She didn't want to go into details with Julia there, but she did tell me that she was not feeling well that evening. So we sat up until midnight, watching TV and talking a little, with Julia and Elliot, their Jack Russell Terrier, curled up next to us. As the evening went on she began to feel better. She even ate a peanut butter cookie.



When I am afraid, I will trust in You.

Psalm 56:3

August 2nd

I couldn't get back to sleep after I awoke at two o'clock in the morning. I felt a terrible gut-wrenching fear that I haven't had in years. I think it was a "*panic over losing someone you love*" fear.

Help me, Lord. I'm so afraid of this cancer... I don't want my Mom to go through this. Thinking ahead can put me over the edge. It makes me realize how much I have to grow in trusting You. And my kids need the example of a trusting child of the King to inspire them to trust too.

I know we're only at the tip of the iceberg, but I am holding on so tightly, with both hands, till my spiritual knuckles are white.

Or maybe it's You holding on that tightly to me.



*Every good and perfect gift is from above,
coming down from the Father of heavenly lights,
who does not change like shifting shadows.*

James 1:17

August 3rd

Tonight was a *gift*.

Dad made a great dinner, obviously enjoying every moment as Michael and Aaron helped him in the kitchen. Maria, Isaac, and Dad's friend George were all there too, and it was crowded and lively. After dinner, we spent the rest of the evening sitting in the living room listening to the rich sounds of Dad's Barbershop quartet as they rehearsed hymns around the kitchen table.

We spent hours talking about important things like heaven and trivial things like cleaning the spare room, watching the dogs wrestle in the middle of the living room, and listening to Julia talk funny with salt water taffy on the roof of her mouth. Mom was happy and pretty tonight.

Last night was not so enjoyable.
Mom was trying to assimilate all of this, still in disbelief,

wondering about the pain, where to put the "bed", and how Dad will make it without her.

It was so hard, but it was so important to talk.

Funny how I never noticed just how much I *love* to talk with my mom.

Sean called from Wisconsin, and I could tell it was a wonderful treat for her. It was so fun listening to Mom's side of the conversation. She can be feeling so unwell, but when she's on the phone with one of her kids, her eyes sparkle, her face brightens, and she chatters on like she's on top of the world.

August 5th

We're enjoying Tami's visit and her sweet children. Mom is smiling all the time, especially at two year-old Daniel. He's adorable. She especially loves it when he sings "*Itsy Bitsy Spider*" for her with his big blue eyes shining.

Mom was here at my house for the day yesterday because Dad, Greg, Tanya and Kate went to the Pirate's baseball game. She was very glad that she opted out of that trip, since it turned out to be "hotter than a sauna" according to Dad. They had seats behind home plate right in the sun.

While Mom was here in my kitchen, we took pictures as she was holding Baby Jake. He was happy for the *longest* time on her lap.

* * *

We also had a wonderful visit at Mom's house tonight. Tami ordered pizza and Dad rented a great movie.

The living room was filled with family...Maria and Isaac, Tami and her three children, me and my girls, Mom, Dad, Kate, and the dogs, of course. Every inch of the floor was covered.

We loved the movie. The setting was in the fifties; so it was nostalgic for my parents...they even remembered the stainless steel coffee pots in the diners. We smiled at the end (it was a very warm ending), and we called it "not" a movie, but an experience.

Perhaps we loved it because we were together.



August 6th

Tuesday evening around six o'clock Mom called and said she thought it would be a good time to go to the Gardens at Mill Creek Park. I was so glad she wanted to go somewhere. She has cancelled so many plans in the past few weeks.

We were hurried, but Mom wanted to be back home in time for the late dinner Dad was preparing. So we quickly packed up the children and were on our way on that cool, bright summer evening.

We didn't realize how long it would take Mom to walk across the sunlit gardens to the white gazebo to sit down. She said the grass makes it very difficult for her to walk with her cane.

Once we were there, she watched her grandchildren run from flower bed to flower bed, as full of energy as she was lacking it. Tami took a picture of Rachel and Daniel with their Grandma, while Kate held the baby. Mom looked weary there on that bench in the sun. The walk had tired her and the wind had redone her hair.

August 7th

I have been asking my parents if I could go with them to Mom's next oncologist appointment, so they picked me up on their way to her follow-up visit this afternoon.

The Cancer Clinic office was in the old section of the hospital, a bit cramped, but the people there were wonderful. They were so prompt with us; the doctor, a friendly, white-haired gentleman with glasses, came right in after we arrived. He was very warm and kind. He asked Mom how she was feeling, and she answered, "Great!"

When I said, "What about the pain in your chest?", she immediately gave me a look that quieted me. Mentioning some of her other symptoms was also not well received. I don't know why she wants to hide those things, unless it just makes them seem less real if she does.

Her doctor was kind enough to explain his perspective of Mom's prognosis all over again to me.

He said that if this was only localized to the lung, he would be strongly recommending chemotherapy to shrink it and give her more time with us, but there are so many spots on the liver, and this cancer grows so quickly, that he thought treatment would be pointless. It was then that Mom reaffirmed her decision to refuse any chemotherapy.

At that point the doctor allowed me to ask questions from the folded sheet of paper I brought out of my purse. We've all been spending these weeks researching options.

On our way out of the office, we passed an older man with a weary countenance sitting in his wheel chair. Mom touched his arm, smiled, and said "Hello!" as if she'd known him for years. It took the gentleman by surprise.

We stood outside the hospital in the afternoon sunshine waiting for Dad to bring the car around. Mom asked me if I thought she was doing the right thing by refusing treatment. I told her I wasn't sure...and that it depended on whether we had all the facts about its effects and benefits, but if it meant compromising the last months of her life for nothing, then she should enjoy these days when she feels good.

It seems to us that making the decision about treatment is even more challenging than dealing with the news of this disease.

Mom the told me she'll cry every day when this all hits her, and that it doesn't seem real yet. It doesn't seem real to any of us.

August 10th

Kate and I ran errands together today. We stopped for fast food and ate lunch in my van in the church parking lot and talked about Mom. Lord, I have to keep reminding myself that Katie is only eighteen. She's so young to be losing her mother.

* * *

That evening we were all at Mom's house for Maria's birthday. Greg and Tanya bought her a chocolate cake, and when we discovered that we had no candles, we improvised and lit toothpicks.

* * *

Mom said she slept without waking last night, which was good, because she had such a big day ahead of her!

Twelve of us caravanned with food and fishing poles to a friend of Dad's who has acreage with a pond and a little beach and four-wheelers and spirited dogs and a beautiful log cabin. When we got there, Dad put his floppy hat on his wife and lifted her onto the four-wheeler to drive her down to the picnic table by the water. She wrapped her good arm around his waist and they took off at great speed. It was so fun watching them laugh and hold onto each other.

That afternoon Mom sat in the shade by the pond and watched all the activity. She shouted encouragements to Isaac as he raced one of the dogs across the pond to "fetch" a ball, and then she suggested that I find a way to capsize the little boat that Anna, Kate and Julia were riding in...saying, "Don't you think they deserve it?"

Hours flew by, and we were ready to cook dinner back at the cabin. While we were there, Mom was walking towards the railing of the pretty redwood porch when somehow she fell. It was awful. I was standing so close to her and I still couldn't catch her in time. She is hurting now, but she thinks it's only a bruised rib. Dad said he will keep an eye on her tonight, and they both made the decision not to go to the hospital.

Shortly after that incident, Dad spilled boiling water on himself from the pot with the corn on the cob in it. It's a bad blister. These parents... we can't take them *anywhere*.

August 11th

Greg and his wife Tanya spent the morning with Mom and left for their trip home to Philadelphia just minutes before Aunt Joan, my cousin Kim and her three children arrived from Pittsburgh. It was a steady flow of activity! Of course, there were some tears when they first came into the house and greeted “Aunt Marci”, but mostly there was laughter. They were there to lift our spirits.

* * *

There was lots of lively conversation sprinkled throughout the day, and *so many* “memories.”

Kim remembered spending the night at our house often. She said Mom was the only aunt who would come into the bedroom, tuck her in, and give her a kiss goodnight. One evening Mom went to give her a kiss on the cheek, but Kim turned her face at the last moment and Mom

accidentally planted a kiss on her ear. Kim also remembered all the warm summer nights that Mom let us sleep on the front porch. We loved it, even though it was a challenge to get comfortable on that slanted wooden floor.

* * *

Later in the evening Kim asked if we could look at some wedding pictures, and after a dusty search in the bottom of a dining room drawer, I found a yellowed pile of eight by ten photos. Kim, Aunt Joan, Dad and Mom were sitting around the kitchen table, pointing to pictures and telling their stories.

* * *

I didn't know...

I didn't know that Mom lost her front caps on their honeymoon, and then their car broke down and Mom had to wait while Dad went for help. She said she had no top teeth and was sitting on the side of the road in the car tremendous pain. It wasn't very romantic.

I didn't know that Mom and Dad met at the neighborhood pool when Mom asked him to give her a ride home. She was very surprised when she walked with him to the parking lot and discovered that her transportation would be a messy painter's truck!

They went out together that evening.

I didn't know that the seamstress forgot to deliver Mom's wedding dress. Mom told us she had to take a streetcar downtown to pick it up the day before her wedding.

* * *

The rest of our evening was spent talking and laughing and reminiscing... with the wise plan of ordering pizza this time instead of cooking (which was Mom's idea and Kim's treat).

Mom actually will eat pizza.
It's good to see her eating.

The entourage headed for Maria's to visit, and then back home to Pittsburgh late that evening, taking my Julia with them.



...the cheerful heart has a continual feast.

Proverbs 15:15

August 12th

I went over today and Mom was looking much better until she tried to eat chicken soup. She's realized that she doesn't feel good after she eats unless it's something sweet. She had pie and her protein shake and was fine.

The evening was so relaxed. I had Dad's delicious stuffed peppers for dinner and then ironed Mom's clothes for her trip. She is still in disbelief that Maria moved so quickly on the answer to the question...

"Where would you like to go that you've always wanted to see?"

Mom's answer took Maria, and all of us, by surprise.

"Las Vegas!"



The generous man will himself be blessed...

Proverbs 22:9

August 13th

My mother spent this morning washing her hair and packing. She kept looking at us saying, "I'm going to Nevada!" Then she would get a sunny smile on her face like a little girl on Christmas Eve. It was wonderful to see her so excited!

She's taking her insurance card, her meal shakes, her cane and her bathing suit. It was fun watching her and Maria talk and plan. Maria told us that she doesn't care what she's spending... she'll have her whole life to pay it off. She said, "I'm taking my mother to Vegas!"

* * *

Standing in the kitchen just moments before they left, the expression on my mother's face changed dramatically and she said, "I don't want to go."

Maria argued, "Yes, you do!"

Mom answered, "No, I don't."

Then, as quickly as it had come, her far-away gaze faded, her smile reappeared, and she said,

"Yes, I do!"

Maria rushed her out the door in a persuasive but friendly way (before she changed her mind), but first I put her left sandal on her while Maria put on her right. She was perturbed at the extra help, but we knew she would move so slowly through the airport that there was no time to lose.

We loaded the suitcases...

We wrote down the number for the hotel...

We put her shake in a travel mug...

She gave Kate a hug and a kiss (she had said goodbye to Dad earlier)...

She kissed me and then whispered in my ear,

"Maria's going to have her hands full with me..."

She got into the car...

She waved goodbye...

...and they drove away.

August 15th

Mom was so happy when we talked to her on the phone from her hotel! She had a wearying trip and she said was a little congested in the morning and coughing, but as the day went on she felt much better.

When I spoke to them, they were in their room getting dressed for a night out. They planned to spend the evening at a waterfall show (with classical music) and then they were off to the Follies.

Tomorrow they plan to ride a helicopter and fly over Hoover Dam and the Grand Canyon.

I was so happy to hear Mom say, "I'm glad I came!"



*In his heart a man plans his course,
but the Lord determines his steps.*

Proverbs 16:9

August 23rd

We've spent weeks researching Mom's treatment options, trying to convince her that it might be worth the risk to try chemotherapy. Yesterday was to be her first treatment, but she changed her mind. When the nurse stood there reciting the side effects, it must have overwhelmed her. What a very difficult decision, and how she has labored over it... with all of her children encouraging her to try one round. But we know this has to be *her* decision.

What an emotional day. The truth of all of this was right there in front of her like never before, and she was flooded with questions and tears.

Oh, this is so very painful.

* * *

Tami and her children are here. It's late and they're all tucked in. Greg just got in tonight and Sean will be here Sunday, so we'll all be together for one day!

Mom wants to plan her funeral and talk about so many things.

She hasn't felt well this week, but there are many calm, happy times, sometimes with lots of laughter and conversation. The "serious" is moving into our moments, and it must be needed too, though there's no script for these days. We're holding onto the Lord and reminding ourselves of how many others have walked this road and have been sustained. Our role is to be faithful and trusting. God's Role is to be His Amazing, All-Sufficient Self.

* * *

Oh, Lord, help all of us to be very patient and honest with each other. There are so many dynamics, and it seems our strengths and weaknesses are magnified. There are many opportunities to fall or to stand in love.

Keep us all *safe* as we maneuver through our lives in a bit of a haze. Thank You for guarding Michael's life! His car was on the news tonight, sitting almost vertically in a ditch off a country road. He had spun around on the pavement, narrowly missing oncoming traffic. Thank You for Your Invisible Hand of protection.

May this coming weekend with all of us together be sweeter than we could ever imagine, because of Your Presence.

You alone can make the bitter "sweet."

August 26th

The whole family was together last night!

We took a picture with all of us on the front porch while curious neighbors were watching. It must have been such a scene. The dogs were panting over our shoulders, Mom was laughing, and Michael was the photographer, whose hilarious antics were designed to let us know just when he was snapping the picture. We had to put paper towels on the steps so we didn't get purple berry stains on our pants. Most of us were in bare feet.

That will be a timeless photo.

* * *

Yesterday afternoon I sang in an old white Methodist church in Bristolville Center. I told them my mother's story before singing a song called *"Hold On,"* and they cried with me. The pastor had the whole church hold

hands and pray for our family. After the music ministry a family met me in the back of the sanctuary along with their mother, who was in a wheelchair. They hugged me tightly and shared that their Mom, a bright-eyed, silver-haired lady in her eighties, had lung cancer, and was given two months to live. We promised to pray for each other.

How curious it is that I had to force myself to go and sing this morning. I was longing to stay with my family because Sean was due home, and all of us would be together. But the Lord wanted me there at that little country church. He used that time to open my eyes. I was reminded again today that there's a world out there beyond ours, and so many are looking for His Hand and His Purpose in painful seasons. How rejuvenating it was to stand up there and talk about His Love in the Storm! I thought I was empty, but now I realize that God has been giving and giving... and giving again.

* * *

Mom is planning on flying with Michael to Wisconsin on Friday to stay with Sean for five days. Be with her, dear Lord. I know she's going for their benefit, and not her own.

August 30th

Lord, You made provision for this time in our lives *long* before its pages unfolded before us. None of this has taken You by surprise. This morning, Sweet Jesus, You have embraced me, and whispered to me that You are passionate about my family, and that nothing will keep You from reaching them.

You have told me that there will be countless answers to prayer in the weeks ahead, especially as You draw our hearts even closer to Your Own.

So, not my will, but Yours be done.

This is my altar this morning, here at this kitchen table, where my will is placed before You....
my agendas,
my privacy,
my goals,

my neat little package wrapped up and tagged with the label "my plans".

I lay it all before You.

Consume it Lord, and create Your beauty from the ashes of my surrendered will.

* * *

Tami called. She's had a change of heart and longs to be here in Warren, not there in Columbus, three hours away, but *here* with her mother and her family. Her husband Mark has been serving in the army (in Cuba) for almost seven months now, and Tami has been so strong... caring for a new baby, a toddler, and a five year old.

Lord, please give us the energy and creativity to make this work, with ten people in this little Cape Cod and one bathroom. Give our family grace and open giving hearts!

Just before Tami's call, my friend Sylvia phoned and told me she was moving into a high-rise for seniors. She wanted to know if I could use a double bed that she wouldn't need. I told her we had no room for it, but thanked her for thinking of us.

After Tami's call, it was as if You tapped me on the shoulder and whispered, "You'll need that bed."

I called Sylvia back.

September 10th

I love you, My Dearest Shepherd! This amazing time here by this pond is your gift; Your sustenance is poured on my hungry heart. Thank You for the clear morning sun, the flocks of carefree geese, the mist hovering over the water.

Lord, You are showing me like never before just how able and never-failing and ample You really are.

* * *

Last month I was asking You how I could possibly find time to spend some moments alone with You when there are young adults up until one in the morning and babies up at six in the morning and so many needs in our home. Then You gently whispered to me that I should stay for

awhile here at the college campus by the pond after I drop Aaron off to school each morning. So for weeks I've been bringing this journal and my Bible and running into Your Arms here, then the rest of my day is completely saturated with your Presence and Help. It's not that You *wouldn't* help me if I didn't meet you here. It's just that my perspective would be so fuzzy without this time with You, and I would not have the vision to *see* Your Help and recognize Your Presence.

* * *

There's something both painful and precious in this cancer. It's painful to have the shadow of death permeate each hour, but it's so precious to treasure someone's smile the way we treasure Mom's. How my heart tries to capture these moments and hold them tightly, to hang mental pictures on the walls of my mind and never let them fade.

Change is coming. Help the frightened child in all of us. Sing softly a calming lullaby over our restless hearts. Oh, how your Strength and Supply and Love reach the heavens and beyond! I've found not one hint of lack in any of this, only New Mercies around every painful, joyful bend.

September 12th

Good Wondrous Morning, King of My Life! You are Unending Love, boundless, amazing, and rich in mercy! You are Strength when I am so weak, beauty in ashes, sweetness in the bitter, rain in the desert.

My heart is so broken. Mom is having some difficult days, but in it all I have never seen Your Provision like this before. I have never understood You like this... though I *thought* I did.

The horse was just trotting, and I thought I knew the strength of those reins. But now, reaching a full gallop, I am holding on tightly and the Reins of your Love are tested and tried and found to be faithfully secure and trustworthy...so I hold on to them and they do not fail me.

Thank You Amazing God, Whom I love more deeply than I have ever loved You before.

I thank You Lord~

...for my sister Tami's presence in our home, planning, praying, shopping, visiting, calling, feeding, loving on children

...for sweet Baby Jake's soft face, his cuddling, his smiles
...for funny Daniel's two-year old humor, his curiosity, his joy

...for pensive Rachel's eagerness to learn, her amazing mind, her tender heart

...for my mother and her cheerful "Goodnight Honeybunch," for the medicine that is helping her dizziness, her surprising sense of humor and laughter, and her comment, "This is going to be hard on all six of you kids."

My hand on hers, "Yes, Mom, it is."

Her answer, "It's going to be harder on *me*."

The sun is higher and warmer now here at the pond. I have spent rich time with You. Time to go home...

fully blessed
and crowned
and drenched
and filled
and cared for
and enriched
and clothed
and covered.

September 17th

Good morning, Beautiful Savior! Anna and I have been amazed by You already today. You *impressed* us on our drive to school. Our view at the end of the road held the golden birthing sun, in a red and glowing sky that was reaching and spreading to the north and south and kissing the bottom edges of the marshmallow clouds.

Now the sky here over the pond is full of soft grays and whites, with some rays of light cascading through the open windows of a cloud.

Thank You, Lord, for another day that Mom felt *good*. We laughed and talked. How cozy it felt to sit next to each other, sort of slumped together on the loveseat in happy relaxation...eating popcorn and watching television. We talk about so much.

The Rose

"Did you see the yellow rose?" Mom asked me, as she looked towards the vase on the kitchen table. Its glorious shade and huge sunny petals took my breath away.

She smiled and continued...

"It was the only one on the bush that was that color. All the rest are white and red. I picked it a few days ago. See? It's starting to open." Mom stepped over to the table, leaned over the rose and inhaled its sweetness.

Then she hesitated a bit and raised her eyebrows. "Do you think it's a sign?"

"What do you mean, Mom?"

"A sign...from God. It means that He wants me to live."

I am the Resurrection and the Life. He who believes in Me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in Me will never die.

Mark 11:25

September 18th

Praise be to the Lord God, the God of Israel, Who alone does marvelous deeds.

Psalm 72:18

Lord, You don't need me to do anything marvelous. You can be Your Marvelous Self without any help from this forty-one year old housewife from Ohio.

But I so enjoy watching You do Your work, and I know You are telling me to expect Marvelous Deeds to be done in my moments, in my world, because You are here and being Yourself.

I know You didn't design this cancer, but because of Your Love, *anything* can become a tool in Your Transforming Hands. Your Grace takes every circumstance and rolls it with ever-increasing speed down the hill of our days, absorbing everything (and everyone) in its path and changing us all.

So I will look for the Marvelous today...

in the moments with Mom,
in the making of meals,
in the time with Tami,
in the visit with Aunt Joan,

and in whatever else You have up Your Glorious Sleeve.

And we know that in all things, God works for the good of those who love Him, and are called according to His purpose.

Romans 8:28

September 20th

I am looking at a picture of my heart as I sit here by the pond. There across the field to my right is the highway with its endless streams of fast-paced drivers propelled by their busyness and obligations and schedules.

But there in the foreground is the water...clear and calm and still and beautiful.

Lord, my life right now is the highway, but You have made my heart like that tranquil pond. I am quieted by Your Love. Your Love never fails for You are Love, and not one moment will I live and breathe today that You will not be totally and completely immersing that moment with Your Love and Provision. I trust You.

Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you will revive me.
Psalm 88:7



The Son is the Radiance of God's Glory...

Hebrews 1:3

September 26th

How little I have thought of Heaven, but what joy I've found bursting forth from each verse of scripture that speaks of the promise of our future with You! This is what You want us to focus on in this season of our lives, Lord. Thank You for leading Nancy from the cancer support group to give us those beautiful articles and scriptures to dwell on.

You are showing me that this is not just about "holding on",
or being strong through the storm,
or trusting through the pain...

There must also be a *Holy Anticipation*, an expectancy of meeting You, the Radiant Son at the end of the road. You're like the sunrise that waits and greets us in the

mornings...even after the blackest night.

So I won't just look down at the path and struggle through each step, but while I hold Your Hand, I will look *up*. We may have no clear picture of the steps ahead, but we have a *brilliantly clear promise* that its Jesus Who is waiting at the Brink of the Horizon! How kind and good of You to give us these descriptions of our Real Home.

I am not going to be an anxious, pensive daughter. Though I am broken, I am comforted for I know without a shadow of a doubt, the Eternal Destiny of a heart that trusts in Jesus. Lord, You are giving me such joy for my mom this morning!

Set your sights on the realities of Heaven, where Christ sits at God's right Hand...Let Heaven fill your thoughts.

Galatians 3:1,2

I will come and get you...

John 14:2

September 30th

When Kate emailed me saying that Mom would like a birthday party, I never imagined in my wildest dreams an event like today. A few weeks ago we began to call and write to relatives and friends, and to plan a party and potluck meal in the hall of the church. So many said they would love to come, but we never expected the remarkable outpouring of over a hundred people, bringing food and roses and gifts and cards and their presence.

Dad, Maria, Greg, Tami, Kate and I worked on the details. We ordered a giant cake, decorated in icing with the colored picture we took on the front porch of our whole family. We gathered decades of pictures of Mom, her children, and her grandchildren and these were spread across another table under glass. On that table we also placed a beautiful wicker basket, hand-painted by Kate, which read “Mom’s Wish Box.”

It would soon be packed with birthday cards.

When Mom discovered that the Steelers and Browns were playing each other that same day, she smiled and told us she was sorry, but she wouldn't be able to come to her own celebration. So we brainstormed until we found a solution. We would bring the football game to the party! Cousin Michael, Greg, and Dad hooked up a large five-foot television that Dad rented. Our Pittsburgh relatives and our Ohio friends sat on different sides of the room, and the friendly rivalry and mixed cheers and "boos" added even more interest to the afternoon.

* * *

We made the party a harvest theme, and Greg's wife Tanya tied beautiful green raffia bows around cornstalks, which were on two pillars and under an eight-foot painted sign that read, "We Love You Mom." There were red and golden paper leaves taped onto the walls, and bright yellow helium balloons on all the tables. Everyone worked together and joined hands in all the details. It was absolutely remarkable. The Lord shined on us through His people.

Dad cooked his own recipe of sausage and peppers in the church kitchen that added to the amazing array of food that came in for the potluck.

I invited Jack, a family friend and a gifted musician, to come and play piano during the party. His music made the perfect backdrop for our family event. He played while Dad sang a love song to his smiling wife, and while Tami

and I sang together. We were each holding one of her sleeping sons in our arms.

There was a constant stream of friends and family carrying flowers and presents to the gift table, which was soon overflowing with some of the largest and most glorious arrangements of fragrant roses we'd ever seen.

* * *

I'll never forget the moments just before the party began. It was a bit after two o'clock and the place was already bustling. The excitement was building as the huge hall began to fill with the clanking of dishware and the hum of conversation and children's laughter. I realized it was finally time to go back to the house and see if Mom was ready for me to bring her over. What a contrast as I stepped out of the pandemonium of that party to the still silence of Mom's home. I walked upstairs and found her dressed in her black and yellow Steelers sweatshirt, standing in front of the bathroom mirror and slowly combing her hair.

"I can't go," she said. "Look at me. I look terrible."

Mom's hair was disheveled and she needed some makeup, but we could fix that. Yesterday she had been so sick she could have never gone anywhere, so I used a curling iron on her golden brown hair; she added a touch of blush and lipstick, and we were over our first obstacle.

She looked beautiful.

Mom hesitated again as we were on our way out the door. She leaned on the kitchen counter, and said,

“I can’t go...I don’t *deserve* all of this.” She looked at me with her pretty green eyes wide and serious.

I told Mom she was so loved, and that she was doing everyone a favor by giving them a way to show that love to her. People felt helpless, I said, and this gave them a chance to do *something*. They welcomed it.

She thought for a long moment, took a deep breath, and said, “All right...let’s go!”

Then she grabbed her cane and headed towards the door.

I don’t know if I have ever loved that lady as much as I did in those moments.

October 5th

We went to a buffet for dinner tonight with Mom, Dad, Aaron, Julia, Tami and her children. There were one hundred and fifty blue-shirted Indiana State football players in town for a game this weekend, and they were all eating with us. It made it quite crowded and energized! Mom didn't eat much but she did enjoy every morsel of her cheesecake.

During dinner we made the decision to spend the rest of the evening at Mom and Dad's house without children (just the baby), so we could finally go through old photo albums together. We've been talking about doing this for weeks.

* * *

We sat by the door in the kitchen and a warm autumn night breeze kissed our faces as we went page by page

through the years and Mom's vivid memories. How she came alive as we walked through those days with her! It was as if the aneurysm never happened. She spoke clearly and her eyes sparkled with every detail.

* * *

Tami and I sat on either side of Mom and took turns writing names and notes in gel pen on the fragile black pages near each photo. How we wish we'd had a tape recorder. Some of her memories were so extensive and fascinating.

* * *

One picture showed Grandma Ackerman with the sun shining off of her nose, making it look huge and bright. Mom said Grandma told her that her nose was grabbed by a goose when she was a little girl. Dad commented that all Polish women have that nose, and that he finds it hard to believe that they were all bitten by geese.

* * *

We came to a picture of a blonde-haired little boy. "That's Gary," she said. "He was a stupid little kid." Then Mom remembered why she didn't like Gary. He had the highest house on the hill in her neighborhood, and she longed to climb the steps to look out and see the view from his front porch.

After she was finally invited to visit, he accused her of stealing a small toy, and she was never again allowed back

onto his porch.

Of course, she was innocent.

* * *

There was a picture of a scraggly Christmas tree sitting on Grandma's sunporch. Mom said she remembers decorating it herself as a little girl while Grandpa was asleep on the couch. He had been drinking. Somehow that tree began to topple over, and despite her efforts to save it, it fell. Grandpa never knew it happened. He slept through it all.

* * *

Sean called during our visit, and Tami told him we were having fun. She was quickly corrected. Mom stated that we were having a "good time." She said Kennywood Amusement Park would be "fun."

* * *

Capturing moments like those we shared last night is like trying to harvest an enormous garden, knowing that a flood will be coming soon and washing it all away. I guess anything we gather is a gift, and that we should be settling in our hearts the fact that there will be much lost. But Love is Eternal, and will never, ever fade away. That Love is what we can really grasp right now...and that can never be taken away from us.

At the beginning of this drama the insights and miracles

and stirrings were like the gentle pattering of a light spring shower and I didn't find it too challenging to capture the raindrops with my pen.

Now we're in a downpour and the rivulets and pools are collecting and I can do nothing but get soaked.

* * *

Mom and I talked often this week while I ironed in her kitchen and the house was so empty and quiet. We talked about her funeral. She wants no evening calling hours and a Mass in the morning.

She wants to buy new carpet for the house with some extra money they received.

And she wishes she could die quickly like her mother did.

* * *

Later she was feeling sick on the couch...waves overwhelmed her as we sat together.

"What a way to go," she stated with a sigh.

* * *

I was sitting on the porch swing with Baby Jake. The evening was warm and delicious and he was content. Mom walked out onto the porch and with much tenderness she asked him a question.

"Am I going where you just came from?"

October 6th

This cancer is so mysterious. It's like hearing on the sunny morning of our well-planned picnic day that there will be thunderstorms, sure and severe, and that our celebrating will be cut short.

Then we watch the sky. We go anyway because the sun is bright and welcoming.

We set the table with a red and white checkered cloth.

We look up. Nothing but sun.

Okay...set the plates and start to cook.

Smile. No sign of rain.

But then a cloud, dark and foreboding, appears on the horizon.

Hurry and eat. Start to pack up.

But soon the cloud passes over...

Sunshine again!

Should we try and swim? Set dessert?

Maybe the weatherman was wrong.

Maybe the storm went south of us.
Back to the picnic and much looking up.

Oh, it's gray again...there over the water on the distant shore.

This time it's very dark there.

Yes. It is coming this way, and the wind is picking up, blowing the edges of the red and white checkered tablecloth this way and that and taking the paper plates on a high ride to the sky.

That's where we are now. Knowing Who is in control of the weather, and every gust of wind.

Maybe its real purpose is to fly someone we love to her real Home.

Lord, You are telling me there's no need to fear the storm.

In your distress you called and I rescued you, I answered you out of a thundercloud...

Psalm 81:7

October 8th

Lord, these days are so seamless from morning to night. The moments I spend here by the pond are undistracted times when I can listen to You, where I can cry to You, and where I can watch the sunrise and know that You put it there to remind me of Your New Mercies.

I need to capture a priceless moment. I can still see Mom's shining smile as she held out a magazine we had given her that was filled with scriptures about Heaven.

"Have you read this yet?" she asked me.

"Some of it," I answered.

Then she said with more joy and excitement than I've ever seen on her face...

"It's *glorious!*"



*Let Your Face shine on Your servant;
save me in Your unfailing love.*

Psalm 31:16

October 10th

Thank You Lord, for the sweet time that Mom and I had outside on the deck in the sunshine. A tiny waterfall made music as it fell over the rocks in Dad's goldfish pond, and dozens of sparrows collected on the rod iron patio furniture a few feet away from us. We laughed as Elliot ran toward them on his short little Jack -Russell-Terrier-legs and a brown flapping cloud of birds rose and disappeared across the yards.

* * *

The day before yesterday, even though it was a day that Mom felt very unwell, four month old Jake and his baby-joy made her smile. I held Jake while Mom sat at her usual seat in the kitchen. She looked up at her newest grandson and her eyes lit up as she talked to him.

Jake kicked and waved his arms like he would fly out of mine, responding to her every word and grin, and erupting with smiles. He loves his grandma.

* * *

*Restore us, O Lord God Almighty
Make Your Face shine on us
That we might be saved...*

Psalm 80:3

October 17th

O God, do not keep silent; be not quiet, O God, be not still.
Psalm 83:18

I am here by the pond watching a bright morning sunrise, with wisps and swirls of soft clouds surrounding it. Underneath the sun, the clouds are illuminated by shining yellow and orange hues and some of the most beautiful shades of blue I have ever seen.

Last night You did not keep silent, but You were reminding me of how deep and wide Your Love really is. These past days I have not been dwelling and hiding in that Love which is our only Refuge and Defense in the Storm. Oh, how sweet are these intimate times with You when Your Love is so tangible and so strong. I can hear you say, "You are Mine!" Lord, Your Presence is so comforting, like the reassurance of a father who squeezes his child's hand in a frightening crowd. I can sense an all-encompassing embrace that almost takes my breath away.

May my mother hear you also, whispering to her that she is Yours.

* * *

Last night I stopped at Mom's house to drop off Aaron, who would be Maria's partner in the endeavor of painting Mom's dining room ceiling. Kielbasa and sauerkraut were simmering on the stove and filling the home with a delicious aroma. Dad was painting the woodwork, and Maria was in the center of the dining room surrounded by the drop cloths she had hung from the ceiling to the floor. She was already covered in white paint. It was all the way up her arms and on her nose and in her hair. Isaac was running around the house, and Mom was standing there in her messy kitchen, commenting on how it took two hours just to get *ready* to paint.

We wanted to protect Maria's long chestnut ponytail as she worked, so she donned a cow print cap, and I tied a plastic bag on the top of her hair and placed her ponytail inside the bag. It was so funny.

So life goes on. People work. They laugh. They give. They love. And love never fails. It is *Your Language, Lord..* spoken, whispered, and shouted in the darkest of times and bringing a Brightness that no night can ever conquer.

October 21st

How grateful we are for every day we have with Mom. She is much weaker, and we have Hospice now, but somehow I see her leaning on Jesus more and more, and it is so wondrous. I would have to write in this journal for hours and hours to communicate all the amazing things the Lord is doing. There are surprises around every bend.

Of course, there's much pain also.
I'm calling her cancer "the disease of many goodbyes."

It was just last week that Mom was huddled in a little pink "pajama-ed" ball in the corner of the couch, sleeping most of the day, lips set and firm with discomfort. We all thought her cancer had taken a turn for the worse in a matter of hours. But this week she was up and around, bright-eyed, doing dishes and laughing with us again.

It was only the *flu* the week before.
We never expected something so ordinary.

Tami has been living here in our home for over two months now, and she's growing remarkably in her leaning on the Lord. We lean on each other too, sharing rich tidbits from our personal devotions, cooking together, crying together, going to a ladies' Bible study, and talking about heaven. We've spent our days planning times with Mom, talking about her care, sharing the conversations and moments we have with her, laughing at the children, and giving and receiving tremendous comfort from each other.

Tami's husband Mark will be home from Cuba in a month, so she's counting the days. She remembers kissing him goodbye last January, surrounded by the clutter of still-hanging Christmas decorations. And here we are rounding the corner to Christmas again. Tami said it's hard to believe it's been that long. We compared it to the experience of driving up a big hill when we were little girls. We remembered how the road seemed so flat as our car ascended, until, towards the top, we looked out the *back* window, then we could see clearly how very far we had come, and how very steep it really was.

October 25th

Lord, as I gazed at Baby Jake today, I thought of something spectacular. Our understanding of who You are is so limited, just like Baby Jake's understanding of his world. His small undeveloped mind can only hold so much at this point in his growth. When Mom reaches Heaven, she will know all mysteries; she will know You even as she is "fully known." That's an exciting thought.

When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

1 Corinthians 13:11, 12

* * *

Mom told Tami she will miss seeing almost all of Baby Jake's life here. Tami said, "Well, maybe the Lord will let you peek down and watch him on his graduation day."

Mom said with a smile, "I think I might be busy. You know, I'll be *"in my glory!"*"

* * *

I was driving last night and thinking of Mom, and her pain and fear, and I thought of how often I've heard people say,

"You'll get songs out of this" or...

"There will be so many things to write about through this time. God will use you."

At first those comments made me angry. If it takes my mother going through this to get a song or a message, as if she's on some horrible altar, then I don't want the message. I don't want to minister to anyone else. *Let them find their own message.* I just want to be with my Mom. It's too intense to look in any other direction.

But last night You told me to remember something. You reminded me that this pain is universal. Everyone will have to say goodbye to someone they love. But while I have You, there are so many that don't even realize You're here.

They've never heard Your comforting Voice. They don't know the Promise of Your Everlasting Arms. They haven't experienced the miracle of the Cross.

So, I will gather Your Sweetness *now*, because there are so many who will need what I'm receiving from You.

Lord, You see heart-needs... I do not.
I want to see through Your Eyes,
to love extravagantly,
to give unreservedly,
to sing,
to hope,
to smile,
to cry,
to write,
to talk,
to encourage,
to laugh,
to remember...
to be changed and have You break my heart so that it can
be made more like Yours.

You *love* people passionately. And You want me to learn
to love them enough to come out of my own pain and give
them the Hope and comfort You've given me.

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows.

2 Corinthians 1:3-5



*My flesh and my heart may fail,
but God is the strength of my heart
and my portion forever.*

Psalm 73:6

November 6th

Speak to me, Jesus, in this silence by the pond...so still except for the rhythmic sound of raindrops gently falling on my car roof. Speak to me through Your Word this morning. I'm in Psalm 88 today. Oh, Lord, what a psalm of questions. David is so heartsick, and so expressive of his confusion.

"Why, oh why do You reject me and hide Your Face from me?"
(v.14)

Yet, he keeps crying to You. He doesn't give up. He calls You *"the God Who saves me"*.

He says he comes to You in the morning, (v.13)
so You are *first* in his heart and on his mind.

He says he comes to You day and night, (v.11)
so You are *always* on his mind.

Then He says that everyday he calls to You, (v.9)
so You are *forever* on his mind.

Even though he may be feeling abandoned, he must know that he is *not*, for he says he cries to *You* for help, and he spreads out his hands to *You* ...and not to anyone else.

Lord, so many of these next scriptures could describe my mother's experience now. Her "soul is full of trouble and her life draws near the grave"(v.3)...she is "confined and cannot escape" (v.8) and there are times when "her eyes are dim with grief"(v.9). Like David, she's told me that she wonders if there is some sin that she is paying for.

Help her, like David, to keep calling You...*first, always...and forever.*



November 21st

Winter is coming. We can feel it and smell it in the breeze...the signs are surrounding us...bare trees, shorter days, Christmas music in the mall.

Mom is like the days of November, fading and softening around the edges as she faces her season's end here. There's more peace on her face this week than I have ever seen. A rest...a resolve. She spends her days in a cycle of sleep and awareness, a few hours here and there of each. She barely eats, but sips broth or coffee or hot honey lemon water. Her frame is small and melted into the loveseat where she spends most of the day till Dad carries her upstairs to bed. She's on no pain medication and is not hurting anywhere which we thank the Lord for daily. Her voice is soft and she speaks slowly and she is frugal with her words. So they are all the more precious.

Four words from her lips this morning were like gold. It was ten o'clock when I came in without calling first, and went to sit on the floor beside her couch. She looked toward me with the most sincere smile and whispered, "I'm glad you're here..."

* * *

I was thinking about an incident many years ago. We were camping by a wide creek at Willow Bay in Bradford, Pennsylvania. The boys were quite small then, and they loved nothing better than to wade barefoot in that creek and search for crayfish and other creatures. They knew every ripple and pool by the time we had reached the last days of our vacation.

Mike and I had planned to end the trip with our first family visit to Niagara Falls, as a kind of "grand finale." I'll never forget Aaron's three year-old face staring up at us from the bank while he stood knee deep in the creek sobbing his eyes out because we told him we were leaving Willow Bay to go on to the Falls. He had never seen these "Falls"...to him all he could ever want he had found, and he did not want to leave it all for some destination that was just a name to him. But we knew better...and despite his muddy, tear-streaked face, we took him to that remarkable place and the wonder of it all caused his big green eyes to widen and his face to erupt in an awestruck smile.

How we cling to our little lives here, putting up such a fuss when the Father calls and says it's time to go.

Good thing He's such a Wise Father and our tears don't stop Him from picking us up and carrying us to a place that will be beyond our wildest dreams.

No eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no mind has imagined what God has prepared for those who love Him.

1 Corinthians 2:9

* * *

Aunt Betty and Uncle Ted visited Mom on Tuesday. When I arrived at my parent's home, the Hospice nurse was sitting on a chair near Mom's loveseat asking her questions. Up until that day, she had seen each nurse in the kitchen. Now she is too weak to move or sit up for that long. Aunt Betty and I went to the other room with Baby Jake who was making some loud, sweet, baby noises, and Tami stayed there in the living room.

Aunt Betty told me some of what she shared with Mom that afternoon.

She told her they had both endured some hard times when their families were younger, but God had enabled them to make it through them all.

She asked her if she would like a massage. Mom said softly, "You and your massage!"

She told her that she had been a good friend, a good mother, a good wife, a good sister, a good daughter. She told her that she had been a *gift* to all of us. When she leaned down to kiss her goodbye, she said, "I'll be coming to join you soon, Marci. I'm seventy-six. I won't be here much longer." Mom was drinking in every word. Uncle Ted also leaned over, kissed her cheek, framed her thin face in his hands, and said goodbye...and that he loved her. I know she felt very loved.

Their tears and embraces were so strengthening there in the kitchen as we saw them off. Aunt Betty whispered, "I'm so sorry you have to go through this." Compassion is so strengthening.

* * *

Last week Mom was telling us about her delicious bath in the morning.

"It was wonderful. I used all hot water...and no cold. I almost fell asleep in there."

"Hmmm," I answered. "Then if someone were to ask if you died of cancer, we would have to say, 'No....she drowned!'"

Mom laughed at that.

* * *

Today was a little scary. When I went back to their house in the afternoon, I went to hug her close.

She said, "Don't. I have bad breath."

I told her that I could take her dentures and go brush them for her, but she was afraid that would make her gag. So we decided to try a flavored, pink, foam swab on a stick. I wet one and handed it to Mom, and she swabbed her top teeth slowly. I went to rinse it off, and when I came back she was making a terrible face.

"Did that little bit of water make you gag?"
Just a strained answer. "Get Dad..."

When Dad came in the room, Mom said weakly,
"I...swallowed...a...cough...drop!"

Good thing Dad is calm. I would have been slamming her on the back, or doing the Heimlich on her, and, frail as she is, she would probably have broken. Dad sat her up, talked calmly to her, and gave her small sips of water. It went down.

Kate said, "She's not going to die from choking after all this. God wouldn't let *that* happen."

* * *

Tami and Mom chose songs for her funeral last week. Tami read the lyrics out loud while Mom sat at the kitchen table and drank her coffee. She responded with an enthusiastic "yes" to the songs she loved, and Tami wrote them all on a little white tablet.

"Mom, is there anything I can get for you?" Tami asked.

"A new body."

"You're going to have that in Heaven."

"I know."

* * *

*When I said, "My foot is slipping!" Your love, Oh Lord,
supported me. When anxiety was great within me, Your
consolation brought joy to my soul.*

Psalm 94:18, 19

November 23rd

Wednesday was a great day for a trip to Pittsburgh; at times there were clear, sunny skies, and then suddenly there were thousands of big fat snow flurries dancing on the roads. It was a delight to spend the day with Aunt Joan, driving through Mom's small hometown of Dormont and videotaping people and places she would love and remember.

We went to her childhood home which was still keeping its post at the bottom of that very steep brick-lined hill; still home to the tall old tree in the corner of the backyard that we played near as children, and that we've seen in so many faded black and white photos...the same tree that had so many generations smiling in front of it for the cameras of yesterday. It stood there covered in the morning's new snowfall, a reminder of the many loved ones who are now beyond our reach.

We videotaped Uncle Mickey's love and greetings from the doorway of his home, and then from his kitchen which was filled with the aroma of chopped vegetables and delicious turkey broth. He said they were having lamb's head, pig's head...and his son-in-law's head for Thanksgiving dinner.

* * *

Next we went to my parent's friend Angie's home. She sat behind her flour-covered counter top and I recorded her as she looked directly at the camera and told Mom about the pies she was ready to roll out for Thanksgiving, and as she shared with Mom her memories of Dad setting fire to the woods when he was a little boy...

* * *

We left Angie's, and Aunt Joan ran the video camera as I drove down the streets of Dormont. She narrated to Mom about each landmark as we passed it.

"There's the Potomac Bakery, Marci...it's been there since 1927."

"The Dormont Theater has been closed for a long time. It's such a shame."

"You remember the hobby shop? It's still there after forty years!"

We saw the little department store downtown, the "5 and 10" where Mom once worked. Aunt Joan said "everyone" once worked there. It's now a billiard hall.

One of the highlights of the day was our trip to the church where Mom and Dad said their vows one spring morning over forty-two years ago.

On my bookcase in our living room I have a scene from that church that is frozen in time; a photograph of my parents walking hand in hand through an arched stone doorway... smiling, but with both their heads bent as they're being showered with rice. Cousin Mary Jean is in the forefront of the picture, a ribbon streaming off the back of her hat, with her little girl hand clutching her rice, and her arm arched and ready to toss.

On the left side of the photo is our Grandma Ackerman, her rice in one white-gloved hand and her glasses and hanky in another, with a sweet expression on her face as she watches the newlyweds, her only daughter and the handsome painter-chef-musician-prince stepping into a future of babies and shiny red tricycles under the tree on bright Christmas mornings....

of footy pajamas and piano recitals and Friday cleaning days and braces and children's kisses goodnight and countless stitches and remodeling of homes and remodeling of hearts....

of pinching pennies and heart-wrenching miscarriages and beautiful dresses with the tags that said "Especially Handmade by Mother"...

of newborn puppies and Siamese kittens and baby snakes and dozens of hamsters...

of college applications and Naval Academy dinners and wedding dinners and grandchildren's' hugs and brain surgeries and healing and tears...

...but most of all their future would hold a *love* that would carry them through every sweet summer night and every bitter winter morning to come.

Now I realize that those two people were being showered with more than rice on that May morning as they stepped through that threshold. *The Lord* was showering them with Grace and Strength and the promise of His Ever-Present Help. His Eager, Able Hands were reaching out to them, ready to carry those two precious people through the Story that He would write with their lives.

Cancer is not the end of Mom's Story, but it seems that God is using it to make a way for His Bride to walk through another threshold with another Groom...One Who has Unending Chapters to share with her.

* * *

She loved the video. "I'm glad you did this," she said from her couch with a smile.

Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and His bride has made herself ready.

Revelation 19:7

November 24th

Mom was tremendously talkative all last night. She was even initiating conversation.

"We still have to pick a funeral home," she said. This led into conversation about having calling hours.. She still says she prefers just an hour before the Mass in the morning. "It's what I want."

"What about Christmas?" she asked. We talked about how no one feels like planning anything... or shopping. We want to keep things very simple. She didn't want to look through catalogs. She said, "There are too many other things to think about."

* * *

"This is hard on you," she said tenderly.

What a mom. Thinking of *me* when *she* was dying. I hesitated as I answered, "No...well...yes...but I want to be here for you. You've been here for me my whole life."

She thought a bit and smiled. "Yes, I have, haven't I? For *forty-two* years!"

* * *

We talked about Dad, and the fact that he gave Elliot a bath after the dog's escape and the mischief that left their pet totally covered in mud. Mom was also pleased that he washed and waxed the kitchen floor.

"Your Dad did *so much* today. He's a doll."

* * *

The oxygen they have set up in the living room works well when she is dizzy. But she does still cough, and yesterday she couldn't stop. It frightened her. It's so hard to watch someone I love be so scared. I feel so helpless.

Mom said, "This is *real*."

I tried to comfort her. "We have to trust the Lord. We have to trust Him."

"Okay," she answered.

Oh, Father, I felt her pain. Does my compassion really help her? Please help me to know how to speak...what to say.

* * *

Even when it's heart-breaking, Lord, help me to stay... like Mary and John who stayed by your Cross, helpless, watching You suffer and die. I will *not* run away.

*Though these days may be quite painful
And my heart will no doubt break
I will be a child who's faithful...
I will stay.*

* * *

"I hope I can go through this," she said.

"You can, Mom. You're strong. And you don't have to go through it alone. None of us do. The Lord is going through it *with* us."

* * *

She was insistent on having Dad come home right away when she was frightened. What a rock he is to her. As she waited, she kept saying, "Where *is* he?"

May she lean on You, Lord, that way... at that point in time when You're the only One who will be able to give her what is really needed. Help us trust You to be more than enough for her!

I sat on the floor while Mom and Dad were on the couch later that evening. Dad affectionately tapped my nose with his finger, and then Mom reached out and did the same. We had a discussion about whose nose I have. Dad said I have Mom's nostrils, and I said I have Dad's bulbous tip. Then Dad asked if I knew that the nose is the only part of the body that keeps on growing as you age.

We noticed that Mom's nose has really not grown much.

Which is a good thing.

* * *

When I first got to their house, Dad was trying to call a number in the paper for a new couch. Mom was on the old blue one where he had moved her that day since the loveseat was beginning to sink so low in the middle. I asked her if she liked it there better, and she said, "Yes, this is nice!"

So I asked her if she'd like to just keep that one. What an incredulous look on her face when she said, almost in shock, "But it's *blue!*"

We all laughed. Mom got her wish for new carpet last week; it's a beautiful shade of green, but it definitely clashes with that color of blue in the couch. It's been bothering her in these past few days.

I find it fascinating that even though she is so ill, she still cares about making things beautiful.

She's always made everything so beautiful.

* * *

There was another very sweet part of the evening. I brought a sack of paperwork to sort while I sat by her couch, and as I went through it, I found an old email from a Christian friend with whom I'd become re-acquainted at our twentieth high school reunion.

I held the letter in my hand and told Mom his story. She listened intently to every word as I described the unusual and heart-breaking trauma of his past few years. He had suffered the loss of loved ones, his marriage, and his health.

Then I mentioned that he was visiting from out of town, and I had just talked with him at church last Sunday. I told her that in his clinging to the Lord, he has recovered and become stronger, even writing this letter with a scripture to encourage *us*. It was from a psalm that gave him strength during his darkest times.

"Oh, let me read it!" she said.

Mom surprised me by her eagerness.

I gave her the letter and the verses she read were from Psalm 62:5-8.

Find rest, O my soul, in God alone;

My hope comes from Him.

He alone is my rock and my salvation;

He is my fortress, I will not be shaken.

My salvation and my honor depend on God

He is my mighty rock, my refuge.

Trust in Him at all times, O people;

Pour out your hearts to Him,

For God is our refuge.



November 26th

What a look on Mom's face when the new furniture was brought in. She was so excited and anxious all day, full of anticipation and not napping at all. You did it, Lord! We prayed for a good price on something that she would love. It's so beautiful!

Dad called the first day the advertisement was in the paper, and I went to the home to look at the couch and love seat. It was a wealthy neighborhood, and the only reason they were selling the furniture was to give the husband a turn to have leather, so the camel-back floral had to go. It was like new.

Barry, a friend from my church, loaned Dad his truck, and I stayed with Mom while the men went for the furniture.

She watched me from her wheelchair as I ran the sweeper over the new carpet. We wanted the empty living room to be ready.

When the couch was first brought in and put in its place under the window, Mom was so thrilled that she used her stocking feet to pull her wheelchair across the room just to touch it. I can still picture her frail hand stroking the soft fabric and smiling.

Thank You, God of Answered Prayers.

December 5th

We had a peaceful evening tonight. I took a mental picture of a scene I will never forget.

Dad had been summoned from the kitchen by his wife...so he came to sit by her side, bringing Conrad the parrot, with all his bright green plumage, perched on his shoulder. He also brought his coffee, and Maria, and their cribbage game...all to the floor of the living room. Elliot was curled up comfortably on Mom's blanket-covered legs, and Max, their Golden Retriever, was napping soundly on the floor next to Dad. Isaac and I filled whatever carpet space was left, all of us posting sentry to the lady who has impacted so many lives with the way she took up space in our hearts.

* * *

Mom gets smaller every day. It seems that we're saying goodbye in increments. This week there have been many changes. She's sleeping much more, her color is pale, and her thoughts and speech are not as clear, though most of the time she can still get a long sentence out if she wants to. And she still responds to my chattering with the standard "Mom" expressions that are so treasured by all of us. And she *still* rolls her eyes at Dad!

* * *

Tami, who went home a few weeks ago to get ready for Mark's homecoming from Cuba, was on the phone with me as I sat on the floor by Mom's couch, and I relayed all that Tami was saying to her. What a broad happy smile spread across her weary face when she heard how much her grandbaby Jake weighs now!

How precious her smiles have become in these days when there are so few of them.

* * *

Mom was sitting up on the couch the other day in a soft purple nightgown, hair askew, and her face drawn. I plopped down beside her, leaned close, and took her hand.

She sighed deeply... "I know," she said.

Later that night, Dad and Kate were sitting on the loveseat, Kate cuddling under the green fuzzy blanket near her father. I was in the now "customary" visitor's spot on the floor beside Mom's couch. Out of nowhere Mom seemed very frightened and called out, eyes wide..."Freddy!" Then she lifted her good hand up in the air and said, "Freddy!" again in a louder voice which for her took much effort. Dad responded with alarm from a few feet away, rising from the loveseat quickly, coming to her side, and answering with much concern...

"What??"

Mom relaxed instantly and her next words surprised us all.

"I just wanted to hear you say 'what'."

* * *

We all know we do not have much longer with Mom. And there's something about this that has struck me. We can't do this for her. How difficult this is, to pull back and realize that she really walks this road *without us*. We can hold her hand, we can give her companionship and prayers and embraces, but she must do this "work of dying" with God and God alone.

* * *

The social worker from Hospice was at the house yesterday. She talked about a poem that speaks of a "first"

Christmas in heaven. Maybe Mom will be there this Christmas! Just the thought of this has given me an excitement that is hard to describe. My cousin's wife Amy said that this is a holy time for Christians, and that it's an honor to be so close to someone who will, perhaps in days, be in the presence of the Creator of the Universe. The hands we hold, so thin and frail now, will be new, and will be touching the Face of God.

* * *

Tonight I leaned over to hear her whisper to me...
"I'm going to die."

Immediately, because of the hope and holy expectancy the Lord has been giving, I answered, "Yes, but you're going to see Jesus face to face Mom. I'm getting so excited for you!"

She listened and seemed to be very comforted.

* * *

That evening Mom kept looking over at Katie. She whispered her name so faintly that I had to lean close to her and ask her to repeat it. She seemed concerned for Katie and her well-being after she's gone.

"She's going to be okay, Mom. We're all going to take care of her. We'll all love on her the way you taught us to. You're the one who taught us how to love. And we'll love on Daddy too. They'll be okay."

"They'll be okay," she echoed, as if she was reassuring herself.

Therefore we do not lose heart.

*Though outwardly we are wasting away,
yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.*

*For our light and momentary troubles
are achieving for us an eternal glory
that far outweighs them all.*

*So we fix our eyes not on what is seen,
but on what is unseen.*

*For what is seen is temporary,
but what is unseen is eternal.*

1 Corinthians 4:16~18





*Jesus knew that the time had come for Him
to leave this world and go to the Father.
Having loved His own who were in the world,
He now showed them the full extent of His love.*

John 13:1

December 7th

Mom was awake almost all day today, but it was an odd kind of "awake." She was staring at the television and echoing my comments, but something was very different. Only You know why, Lord, and even "when."

This week one of the Hospice nurses told us that we can't know how much more time we have with Mom because it depends on when You, Lord, have finished preparing a place for her. She said that some go more quickly because their place is completed while others linger longer while You put the final touches on the Home You're preparing with love for them.

* * *

Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, trust also in Me. There are many rooms in My Father's House, otherwise I would have told you. I'm going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me, that you may also be where I am.

John 14:1 -3



*And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,
"Now the dwelling of God is with men,
and He will live with them.
They will be His people,
and God Himself will be with them
and be their God.*

Revelation 21:3

December 8th

Each day brings such change. We hold onto You, Lord, for You know everything we need, and You have prepared the way before us for these days. You are very active, not passively watching as an audience would watch a play on a stage, but You are immersed in this Drama, intricately involved in every scene and every word, speaking, listening, even whispering in our ears our next lines. We are not puppets, but Your lines are so right for each scene, that when we hear Your Voice and cue, we echo Your Words with confidence. And You are not only Director, but stagehand too. Our Servant-King.

Last night's scene was so difficult. There was some pain and anxiety on Mom's face, and her words were mostly mumbled. But still, to be there beside her, no matter how much I was shaking inside, was the only right place for me to be.

I know Lord, that You have written this Script, and You know the ending act from the beginning.

My scripture for today is Psalm 108, and You are speaking to me from the words of verse 13... "*with God we will gain the victory*".

When I sit by Mom's couch today, let those two words sustain: "*with God*."

When her eyes have a lost gaze, I will remember that we are "*with God*."

When she can't sleep and finds little help in medicine, remind me again that we are "*with God*."

When she longs to tell us what her lips can't form, You will whisper Your Greatest Line and this daughter will remember her part.

"With God," I will say, knowing Who it is that whispers those words to me.

You are Emmanuel. God With Us.

December 10th

Golden sunshine is kissing my face as it shines on me from the top of the snowy pond. It's delicious.

Thank You for shining the Light from Your Son on me now when everything around me seems cold and stark and hard, like that frozen water.

The busy life of those September mornings, the hundreds of geese and the proud heron and the vibrant green grasses and the rippling water, has all quieted to the still lifelessness of this December season.

But there is the reality of the "unseen."

Beneath the icy surface of that pond, there is still activity and growth, hidden but no less real, an entire living world.

Lord, I can trust you when I can't see You, knowing that the work You are doing is not always visible to me.

You have no obligation to reveal everything to me.

* * *

My Father, great discouragement came last night because I was looking through human eyes and not Yours.

"I don't have much time left," Mom whispered faintly as Dad leaned close to her.

"You don't have much time left? How long, Marci?"

"A week."

* * *

Later she had some coughing, and Dad lifted her head a bit, calmed her, and put on her oxygen. Soon afterwards she fell asleep, looking quite peaceful with her hands folded on top of the pale green blanket as she's been for two days. Her wake times are much more precious. She was only up for a half an hour in my whole visit there last night.

December 11th

Lord, You designed it so that I would begin this beautiful new journal here by "our" pond, the pond that has been my place of respite each morning since last August. I was not going to come, but for some reason, even though he now has his license, Aaron didn't want to drive himself to school today. How curious. So I threw on some clothes, and we rushed out the door. Now I know it must be because I *needed* to meet You here.

* * *

I want to record the memories of yesterday afternoon. Dad arranged for me to minister in music to his business networking group at their Christmas luncheon. Greg spent the hours by Mom's side while we were gone. We were relaxed knowing he was there with her.

I was introduced to sing as everyone was having their dessert, and I began the concert with a Christmas song called "Swaddling Clothes." My thoughts wandered to the first year that our children's choir performed it. My parents had walked into the church that night carrying a fresh bouquet of flowers to celebrate the song's "debut."

My mind focused again on the group before me.

The gathering at the luncheon seemed receptive and relaxed as I introduced "Grandma's Song." It was written for my grandmother many years ago in my prayer time during the last week she was on the earth. I talked about memories and insights into the value of our families, and the truth that each Christmas brings not only those memories, but the compelling to love on those we have in our lives *now*, since only God knows who will be here for our next Christmas. Each day with each loved one is a gift.

To close our time together, I asked that we all sing "Away in a Manger." I emphasized that because of her faith in the One Who was born that first Christmas Day, my mother might be spending her first Christmas with Him in Heaven.

As I began to sing, I motioned for Dad to come and join me. He walked to the front of the room looking so handsome in his black suede vest, his Christmas tie, and his salt and pepper hair. But not a line into that old carol, and his eyes filled with shining tears...

and the moment,
the sadness,
the joy,
and the Presence of the Lord washed over both of us,
connecting us in our pain and hope like never before.

We didn't realize it then, but as we sang and cried beside that Christmas tree, the rest of the room was crying with us.

We regained our composure and finished the song together; now noticing the faces of those whose lives were also touched by loss and pain, but whose hearts were drawn to the One Who holds Eternity and calls us all to *Hope* through His Son.



We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord.

2 Corinthians 5:8

December 12th

Father, my heart is like a river with its banks overflowing with Your Goodness and this pain. It's amazing to me that they can flow together.

Yesterday, I arrived at Mom's at eleven in the morning. Greg met me in the kitchen and said he was glad I was there. Mom was trying to tell him something, and he didn't know what she wanted. Her speech was so soft that it was almost indiscernible, and in the last few days we had experienced quite a communication dilemma. All he knew was that she was asking for something that was upstairs in her bedroom. He had already brought her a succession of items, but with each one there was a shake of her head. It was frustrating to her.

I knelt down and tried my best to understand what she was saying, but also with no success.
"Do you want to write it, Mom?" I asked.

She nodded and Greg handed her a pen and an old envelope. With all the focus she could muster, she began to write. Each letter was formed slowly and with much care.

Capital "B"..."e"..."i"..."l"..."I"..."k"..."k"...

She meticulously placed her pen over the letter "i" to make a dot, and then she handed the paper to us. Greg and I just looked at each other blankly, thinking the same upsetting thought.

"Now what do we do? We have *no idea* what this says."

"I'll go upstairs and see if I can find anything in your bedroom that looks like this word," I said to that beloved lady in the flannel pajamas.

A few minutes later, as I walked back downstairs defeated and with no clues, I met Dad on his way in the door. We enlisted his help immediately. He sat down by Mom's side on the couch.

"Marci, does it have anything to do with food?"

She shook her head.

"Are you thirsty?"

Another "no."

"How about pain? Are you having any pain?"

Mom nodded and her eyes met his.

"Do you need your medicine?"

Mom nodded again with purpose and relief and Greg looked at Dad perplexed as he considered that scrawled handwritten word.

Dad held up the envelope, smiled and asked,
"What's the matter with you? Can't you read?"

* * *

Later that day, I told Mom that Tami cut baby Jake's hair because people were calling him a girl. Mom's eyes lit up and there was the glimmer of a real smile.

It was the only smile I saw on December eleventh.

* * *

The afternoon was filled with family coming and going...but then it settled down and I had some precious quiet hours with my Mom.

I clipped her fingernails.

We watched the video that we filmed in her hometown.

I repeatedly asked her if she wanted Elliot on her legs.

She repeatedly said no.

I took his resistant furry body off of hers...again and again.

In minutes he was back.

* * *

As the day wore on it, was apparent that the medicine she had was no longer strong enough to give her comfort.

"You're anxious, aren't you Mom?" Her hands were trembling. She nodded.

I looked into her eyes. "The Lord is right here with us, helping us with every step."

The phone rang. It was the driver with the new medication I had asked for. He was lost and wandering around the neighborhood on that icy evening. How good it was to finally see him walking up the snow-covered front porch steps.

I gave Mom the medicine in a small spoon of pudding. It was a tiny dose, but it brought her pain level from a "nine" to a "one."

* * *

I spent most of the day sitting on the floor by her couch, laying my head on her side and holding her hand and kissing her forehead and telling her I loved her. I am so very grateful for the gift of that day. It was not easy; she was not comfortable. But it was so good to be *with* her. Just *with* her.

* * *

Later that day, Dad could tell that Mom had something on her mind. She tapped his arm with her fingertips like she had been doing for days. He leaned over to her, placing his ear close to her lips to hear her.

"What? You love me?" he asked.

Then he whispered, "I love you, too," and he covered her with face with kisses.

Dad told Mom that he wanted to hold her, and he tried positioning her in his arms while he sat up in the corner of the couch. She looked a bit awkward lying there on him, but leaning to one side.

* * *

At ten o'clock that night Dad said he wanted to pray together for Mom, so we turned off the television and the room was transformed into a quiet retreat. Dad sat by her side on the couch while I sat near him on the floor. Mom was awake and listening as our voices rose and fell in prayer. We were leaning on the Everlasting Arms.

* * *

At eleven o'clock I leaned over Mom from behind the arm of the couch and gave her an upside-down kiss goodnight. I was so surprised when her hand reached up and stroked my hair.

* * *

The winter storm that came yesterday kept Greg from making the drive back to his home in Philadelphia. He decided to extend his week-long visit by one more day. It was to be a providential decision.

I was also kept home. I was to travel to Pennsylvania this morning to sing at a Christmas luncheon and needed to be on the road by seven-thirty in the morning.

It was still dark when I tried to shake off the sleep as my son Michael, a tall figure by my bedside, whispered...

"Mom, its seven-thirty, aren't you supposed to be leaving now?"

I had never set the alarm!

I sprung to my feet, dressed quickly and loaded the car with the sound equipment. I left the car running in the driveway and darted around the house, so frustrated to be so late. It was at that moment that the phone rang. When I answered, I heard my father speaking in a soft low voice.

"Tia...I think Mom's gone".

* * *

There at the house I walked up the familiar steps to see the shadow of my mother on her bed, a lifeless form with no one dwelling inside. Jesus had come for His bride in her sleep just minutes before while my father held her warm hand...praying as her breathing slowed and gently ceased.

Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my Glory, the Glory You have given me because You loved me before the creation of the world.

John 16:24

December 14th

Since the church is being renovated, we all decided to have a Memorial on the 28th of December, and to have a small family gathering and burial today.

The Lord began the morning with a sign of His amazing Tenderness. It made me realize *again* how involved He is with every tiny detail. He is surely “with us”.

There are eleven people staying here at my house, and all of them were trying to get ready to go by ten-thirty. It was *so* crazy!

My in-laws surprised us by having a giant pastry basket delivered by a local bakery. I was *so* happy, since we were all very hungry and I had neglected to plan breakfast. As everyone ate, I used the opportunity to claim some moments in our only bathroom.

By the time I got back to the kitchen, the basket had been ravaged, and there was not much left...just a few plain, lonely pieces of bread. Tami stood by as I looked, disappointed, at the empty basket.

"I was looking forward to something with fruit filling. I would have loved something apricot."

A moment later my neighbor knocked on the door. I stepped outside and she handed me a package and a card, and her tears fell as she told me that she was very sorry to hear about my mother's death. I thanked her, and after she left, I brought the package inside and opened it carefully.

Tami and I gasped.

It was kolache...a fruit pastry roll. And it was *apricot*.

December 16th

Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints.

Psalm 116:15

Christmas songs are playing in the background; I have a sweet cup of cinnamon coffee to sip, a gingerbread candle flickering, and an empty home for an hour. But my heart is full. Through these days beyond Mom's passing, God has been shining. He is drawing, whispering, and loving us in our sorrow. His comforts have been real to us, so tangible and sweet.

We are *so* loved!

There is a single, yellow rose on my kitchen windowsill, given to me by my friend, Michele. It's already opening its wide, fragrant petals...and it's smiling at me when I walk by.

Through all of these flowers and letters and cards and meals and embraces, Jesus is holding us, feeding us, comforting us, speaking to us.

We are *not* alone.

Be at rest once more, O my soul, for the Lord has been good to you.

Psalm 116:7

* * *

It's hard to describe my heart's first response when my father spoke those words... "*Tia, I think Mom's gone.*" I felt the same sense of relief as Dorothy did in the movie *The Wizard of Oz* as her dog Toto leapt from the enemy's grasp and ran down the road while she cried, "He got away! He got away!"

Even though I know Mom "got away", my heart is aching; it's a deep, seemingly unreachable ache. But I know the One Who heals all wounds, and Whose Love can reach that deep.

This "pain of separation" feels like surgery, yet it's a wound that must be borne through all the "dailyness" of life; sitting in the bank drive-thru, washing dishes, picking up children. No hiding in a recovery room.

I know also that we're not alone; millions have felt like this. I remember reading something that C. S. Lewis wrote. He said that to avoid this pain, we must never open our hearts to love...we should not even love an animal. For

to those who love, separation is painful. Love is a risk.

But would I have had it any other way? Would I have given up the joy of her presence, her laughter, her smile, to escape this wound...this broken heart? No. All is as it should be. We drank deep of the joys of knowing and loving her, and we shall drink deep of the grief that comes with her leaving us.

* * *

I've been taken by surprise by the intensity of this sadness. What a mistake to consider much of the work of letting go completed. How could I let go when I was still holding her hand?

* * *

Somehow I thought that a "season of knowing" would inoculate me from the intensity of this good-bye, but it has not. My cousin Steven told me that even when someone is terminally ill, it's impossible to enter that season of grieving until there is a vacuum, a void... the loss of that relationship. I still had the joy of "relating" to Mom up until the evening before she was called home.

What that season *did* give us was the incredible opportunity of loving on her with an eternal perspective; saying what needed to be said, thanking her, holding her, serving her, capturing her words and her smile, and inhaling the sweetness of each day with her.

Perhaps we should love this way always.



*I will sing to the Lord all my life;
I will sing praise to my God as long as I live.*

Psalm 104:33

December 19th

Last night was not an easy night. My Dad had asked me to sing with his choir on Christmas Eve. Since the church is still being renovated, everyone gathered in his living room to rehearse one last time. When I walked in, the room was filled with singers. They were on the sofa, the loveseat, the dining room chairs, and even the piano bench. I found a spot on the beautiful floral couch that Dad bought for Mom in late November.

It was the first time I had ever been seated on that couch. Mom had occupied that space for the last month, covered with a fleece blanket and a little white dog curled at her feet. And there we were, rehearsing birthday songs for the King from a couch that was now empty of suffering.

In the hall beyond the living room stood our Baby Grand

piano, literally covered with a sea of sympathy cards. A large, beautiful photo of my mom as a young woman was placed in the center of them all.

Dad had lit a candle there, and its warm flickering light illuminated her smiling face and cast shadows on the river of compassion that flowed from each handwritten message of encouragement and love.

Dad's rich baritone voice was sweet and strong as he led his small but dedicated choir through each Christmas song.

It was not an easy night, but it was so good.

December 21st

Lord, this sadness hangs over me from the time I open my eyes in the morning until sleep overtakes me at night... there is such a heaviness. I believe there was a spiritual Novocain applied to my heart through these months, and that it's beginning to wear off. The throbbing has begun, like the afternoon after a morning dental visit. Work was done, painful work, and its reality is making itself felt.

How much of this should I fight? How much should I feel? It's hard when it paralyzes me and I spend the day sluggishly, especially when there are so many people to love this close to Christmas. There's so much to do and I feel guilty for moping. It helps when I read and re-read the high stack of sympathy cards that I keep in a copper tin on the end table. There is so much comfort there...it's like gathering friends around me.

I was thinking of how we rebel against this thing called Death, this separation...as if it is very unnatural. Maybe it is. Sin brought death here. We chose it, not You. We brought this to the world You made. We rebelled. We fell.

But You took the sting of death away. You stripped it of its victory by conquering it with Love on the Cross.

* * *

I was thinking of how You wept at Lazarus' tomb though You knew you would be calling him back to life. You *knew* that he would be breathing that sweet Bethany air once again; yet there were tears flowing from the Maker of the Stars. Why, Lord? Was it because You were feeling our pain, knowing intimately each one of the millions of hearts that would be broken by the dramatic exit of a beloved player from the stage of this life?

How grateful I am that Your Love made a Way to catch us in that fall. You tasted death for us, so that death would never again mean goodbye, but "I'll see you soon"....for those who believe in You; for those who believe in a Love that would step in as our Hero and give Himself willingly, so that someday this scripture would be our Eternal Song...

The Lord will be your Light Forever, and the days of your mourning shall be at an end.

Isaiah 60:19

December 28th

Lord, I am overflowing. How can I ever describe Mom's Memorial service? Are there words for that full and all-encompassing sense of embrace in a church so full of people we love and who love us? I wanted to lock all the doors and keep everyone there with us forever.

Father Walker said that having Mom's funeral after Christmas was like having an intermission. Today, the Drama continued and You wrote so many wondrous scenes into this Act that I will never be able to capture them all.

* * *

Last night we met at the church to rehearse the musicians, since Dad is choir director, singer, and pianist there, and he was delegating all the music to them. While they rehearsed, Dad joined in, and it was such a rich warm blend of voices. The music visibly lifted his heart. I would

remind him, “Oh, Dad, you won’t be up here for that song, remember? You’ll be in the front of the church with us.”

But when the rehearsal was almost over, I realized something wonderful. There were no rules for this time. If Dad *wanted* to sing, to stay in the loft and honor his wife from there in the way he knew best, then who was to say he shouldn’t?

We were stifling him with “convention” and the fear of other people’s opinions. So we discussed it and it was decided. Dad would sing from the loft and lead his choir in this celebration of his sweetheart’s life.

* * *

Today Jack’s soothing piano playing floated down to us from the choir loft as we stood in the back of the church welcoming streams of compassionate hearts.

We had all been up half the night before, assembling a twenty-foot pictorial timeline of Mom’s life. We hung a roll of wide paper along Maria’s family room wall, choosing and pasting photos to it and becoming quite sidetracked by the flood of memories that each picture evoked.

This morning we hung the timeline in the church hall, where the meal would be after Mass.

* * *

The Barbershop chorus members arrived early, and assembled one by one in the hall to warm up. Choir members were also beginning to gather in the loft. Dad was upstairs going over last minute details with Jack and my friend Terri, who would be singing. Mom had asked for both of them.

* * *

The next hour was so rich. About twenty men in the Barbershop Chorus began the Memorial service with the hymn, "Nearer My God to Thee." Then Greg walked up to the pulpit and with a transparent love, he read Proverbs 31; his voice overwhelmed with emotion as he read the lines that portray a woman who serves her Lord and her family with her whole heart. Then Kate read First Corinthians 13, the Love Chapter, with tremendous expression and a maturity beyond her years. After that, their pastor spoke, and compelled us to love our families like "Marci" did.

Then it was my turn.

* * *

I had worked on writing a song about Heaven for weeks. But a few days ago I prayed for a song that would be *really* personal, a song just for Mom. I wanted it to be a tribute to the way she loved us, to give people a window into our world and into her heart. God answered me, and the words to a new song came that morning in the shower.

Many times I questioned the Lord, asking Him how I was

to sing at my own mother's funeral, but His leading was clear. He wanted me to eulogize her by inspiring others to love as she loved. He would give me His Strength.

As I stepped out of my pew, walked up the marble steps, and began to sing, I could see Dad's silhouette in the choir loft. My voice broke a few times but I held back the tears, for I had something to say...something precious to communicate about a precious woman.

* * *

As that hour came to a close, Sean stepped up as a spokesman for us all. He read the poem that Greg had written and placed in memory of Mom in the newspaper. Then he described her wit, her laughter, and her convictions. Somehow that spindly, mischievous little brother of mine had become a tall and confident man, and he had all of us laughing and crying.

Aunt Betty gave us all an embrace as we left the church.

She said, "Your Mom would be proud."



December 29th

There was a scene today that told Mom's story quite well, with no words at all.

There in my living room was our Christmas tree, a sad Frazier Fir that we bought from a picked-over selection at the hardware store. It was only a week after Mom died and we were still in a daze. The tree turned out to be surprisingly pretty when it was decorated, making its home in the corner, and reminding us that Christmas had indeed come despite our loss.

On the wall beside it, above my piano, was a wreath, handmade by my sister Maria. She had lovingly taken flowers and pine from the spray that was on Mom's casket, dried them, and arranged them on a grapevine.

She gave each family member one of them, knowing that they would appear again each Christmas.

There in that room was a symbol of the celebration of Christ's arrival and also a symbol that would remind me of my mother's passing.

But on the third wall was one more symbol. We were in Dad's living room when we first saw it, exchanging gifts the week of Christmas. It was a present from my brother Sean and his wife Darlene. Mike and I pulled it out of a large gift bag.

"Oh, Sean, it's beautiful!" I felt the smooth surface of a three-foot hand-hewn cross.

"It's carved from the wood of a one hundred year-old Wisconsin barn. They were going to throw the lumber away," he answered.

The center of the cross had a copper tin piece that glistened with the reflection of the lights from my father's Christmas tree.

Now that cross is hanging on the wall near my own glowing tree, and near the wreath made of my mother's flowers, as God's Answer to my grief.

Not a subtle, quiet answer, but a shout.

If this faith I have been leaning on, trusting in, had ever meant anything, it meant *everything* now.

Someone I loved dearly would have been lost forever without the Cross, that shout of Hope still echoing from two thousand years ago, that Symbol of Love that is unable to be extinguished by death's sting.

By her faith in the One Who hung on that Cross for her, I know that the tree, the wreath and the cross were telling me Mom's story, the Love Story that brings a settled contentment to a daughter's aching heart, the Love Story that will never end.





*For by Him all things were created:
things in heaven and on earth,
visible and invisible,
whether thrones or powers
or rulers or authorities;
all things were created by Him and for Him.*

Colossians 1:16

December 30th

O Israel, put your hope in the Lord, both now and forevermore.
Psalm 131:3

I love many invisible people; Mom, my grandparents, Mike's father, aunts and uncles and friends, and the many sisters and brothers in Christ whose writings and songs and lifestyles have nourished my faith.

The melody of their lives plays deeply in my heart and reminds me that if they died in Christ, they are still making their music; their song goes on, both now and forevermore.

In their passing they left us here. We live "Now", with only the echo of who they were filling the space they left in our hearts. "Forevermore" has become their new home.

But You, My God, are Lord of both *Now* and *Forevermore*. There is just a thin veil, a single breath between the two, and someday it will be my turn to be carried beyond that

veil, and then I will be with those who are now invisible to my eyes, yet *live*.

I believe that when Now and Forevermore meet, the symphony of that reunion will be the most remarkable music we have ever heard...mysteries will be opened to us, the invisible will be revealed.



January 7th

The Lord is close to the broken-hearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.

Psalm 34:18

Tami called from Columbus. She said she was doing her grocery shopping and was heading to the checkout when her cell phone rang. When she looked at the caller ID, what she saw made her catch her breath. It was my father on the phone, but the screen was shining with the words "Connected to Mom."

It seems the waves of missing her can come in the most surprising times and ways.

* * *

Last Monday morning Dad called early in the morning and left a message on my answering machine.

"Tia, I was just sitting here reading the newspaper and evidently there was a reporter there at the concert yesterday. There's a picture of you singing. It's on the front of the second section."

Julia and I picked up a paper that evening, and turned to section B. We saw in that picture the soft yellow lights of a Christmas tree blurred in the background of the church sanctuary; my eyes were closed, my head was raised, and my hand was lifted up as I sang. But there in the forefront of the photo, hanging on the hand that was lifted in praise, was my mother's bracelet, a gift from my husband's mother on Mom's last birthday. My mother *loved* it; she had never taken it off. I remember her fingering it often in her last months.

In those moments I had alone in her bedroom after she died, I had carefully unfastened that bracelet from her wrist and placed it on my own. And now there it was, adorning the singer on page B1, the singer who knew that the bracelet's first owner was singing to the Lord too...in person.

January 8th

I still ask myself if we loved Mom *enough*...if we met all her needs. Maybe that's an unanswerable question, but Lord, You gave me an insight. Even if we did fall short in any way, as humans are so prone to doing, she is bathed now in such Unending Perfect Love, that our efforts pale in comparison. I know she is flowing with forgiveness and a perspective of our frailties, and I can almost picture her heavenly smile, a gentle, understanding and very patient smile, and it reassures my questioning heart.

Nevertheless, it was sweet and right to treasure each day with her, and, even in our humanity, to allow You to help us to love on her "extravagantly."

The door is now closed and there are no more mornings left to walk into that living room, kneel beside that pretty lady on the flowered couch, and listen to her whisper, "I'm glad you're here."

...no more afternoons to make her honey lemon tea,

...no more evenings to kiss her goodnight.

But I thank You, Lord, for being our Wisdom, and allowing all of us to make decisions in that fleeting time that would cause us to deepen our relationships, comfort her in her sickness, strengthen our common Hope in You, and have no regrets.

Your Love won again.

Yes the door is closed now, but I am jubilant and grateful for each "Mom Moment" that You let me to enjoy while that door was still swung wide open. I thank You, Lord, for the amazing woman You designed and lovingly placed in my life as my mom.

And I will, in my brief turn on this earth, be filled with more anticipation than ever before as I await the "never ending" moments we'll share as daughters in the Household of our King.

So, dear brothers and sisters, work hard to prove that you really are among those God has called and chosen. Doing this, you will never stumble or fall away.

And God will open wide the gates of heaven for you to enter into the eternal Kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

2 Peter 1:10 and 11

Seven months later...

July 18th

The sun was bright today as Dad and I drove slowly through the cemetery. Tami, her three children, and Julia followed us there in her van. We pulled the vehicles alongside the grass near Mom's plot. After we parked, Tami opened the van door, and her children flew like doves released from their cages. They spread out everywhere, laughing and running through the open grass, weaving around trees and grave markers, creating a contrast of the vivaciousness of life and the quietness of that holy somber place.

This would be the first time we'd see the stone Dad had placed there on Mom's grave.

We timidly approached an area of newly grown grass.

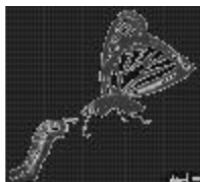
When I saw Mom's name written boldly on that bronze

stone, the impact of her absence felt, once again, like a blast of icy winter wind cutting across my heart. It was as if I was hearing of her death for the first time. Then the pain softened as I looked at the carved pictures on either side of her name.

Dad had requested a very simple stone. But the images he did ask for hovered on that stone with more meaning than any simple passerby would grasp.

In her last months, even though the analogy was well-worn, Mom had asked Dad many times to tell her about death and life afterwards. She wanted to hear about heaven. Dad would say “Honey, I have no way of knowing. How can the Infinite explain Eternity to the finite? Even if He did, we don’t have the capacity to understand. It would be like a butterfly trying to explain to a caterpillar how it could fly. The poor caterpillar doesn’t have the *ability* to understand! He is just clumsy and sluggish and all he has on his mind is his stomach. He can’t see beyond the cocoon that he knows he is destined for at the “end” of his existence. Only the beautifully-colored butterfly can look back and see the reason behind the metamorphosis, as he flies and rejoices in his destiny, delighting in how wonderful it is to be a butterfly.”

We smiled at the butterflies that were carved on a stone that shimmered in the sunshine, decorated with a fresh bouquet of roses and yellow carnations...and the sound of children’s laughter mixed with the warm summer breeze.



Grandma's Porch

Written by Michael A. Ciferno
Grandson

*It is gray and drizzling outside
with an ominous darkness lurking down the road.
I hope it storms.*

*I am on my way to Grandma's
to eat with her and Grandpa.
She has a front porch that I love to sit on when it rains.
I can watch the lightning
and feel the vibrations of the thunder
as they shake the old wooden porch swing I sit on.
Sometimes I look up at the chains
securing the swing to the ceiling
and wonder when they are going to let loose
and send me falling to the floor.*

But it never happens.

*I smell the rain.
I breathe in through my mouth and can taste it.
I can watch the rainfall collect on the old brick road,
 seep into the spaces,
and run towards the curb to the sewer drains.*

*The almost-cold breeze makes me shiver
and I curl into a ball and hold my legs up on the swing
as stray raindrops hit me, caught by the wind.*

*I breathe in again and
catch the slight scent of honeysuckles.*

*I know that at anytime I can open the door
 to a safe and warm house,
 but I don't...*

Just knowing that it is there is comfort enough.

*Through the screen of the window I can see Grandpa
 wearing his torn "Italy" shirt
 and sitting on the loveseat
 watching the Discovery channel.*

*If I listen closely enough,
 even through the rain and the thunder,
I can hear my Grandma in the kitchen whistling carelessly.*

I shut my eyes.



Wonderful Resources

Outreach of Hope is an organization that is overflowing with tremendous compassion, help, and wisdom for those who are challenged by chronic or terminal illness. We began subscribing to their newsletter through mom's illness. I read it over and over, and shared it with my parents and family. You can reach them online at: www.OutreachofHope.org.

Or by mail at: **13840 Gleneagle Drive
Colorado Springs, CO 80921**

Feed My Sheep Cancer Support Group began in my local church, meets monthly, and has been a remarkable tool of the Lord in hundreds of lives. For information on attending or forming a Feed My Sheep group, contact North-Mar CMA Church at 330-856-3496.

Write me if you want to know more about a deeper, saving relationship with Jesus Christ. I would love to share Him with you. Without Him there is no honey.



About the Author

Tia Ciferno lives in Warren, Ohio with her husband Mike. They've been married for over 42 years and have enjoyed the adventure of raising their four children; Michael, Aaron, Anna and Julia. Tia is a songwriter, recording artist and speaker, whose ministry has taken her as far as Germany and South Africa. Her albums include *"Healer of My Heart"*, *"Legacy"*, *"Heaven Sent"* and *"Hold On"*.

Write me if you want to know more about a deeper, saving relationship with Jesus. I would love to share Him with you. Without Him there is no honey.



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A bout the A uthor of L ife

Then Jesus declared,
"I am the bread of life.

He who comes to Me will never go hungry,
and he who believes in Me will never be thirsty.

But as I told you, you have seen Me
and still you do not believe.

All that the Father gives Me will come to Me,
and whoever comes to Me I will never drive away.

For I have come down from heaven not to do my will
but to do the will of Him who sent Me.

And this is the will of Him who sent Me,
that I shall lose none of all that He has given Me,
but raise them up at the last day.

For my Father's will is that everyone
who looks to the Son
and believes in Him
shall have eternal life,
and I will raise him up at the last day."

John 6:35-40

Epilogue: 2004

June 22nd

I was absent-mindedly folding clothes today in the living room. Socks, undershirts...all the whites. Then I picked up something pink, and realized it was a baby's receiving blanket. Kate must have left it here when she was last visiting with her baby. Oh Lord, my heart warmed as I pictured my sweet niece, and remembered the smell of her soft, little head and the magic of her huge, dark eyes. What would Mom say? How proud she would be to see Kate married and growing now as a new mother. How proud she would be to know her granddaughter was named after her. Dad said, "Marci gave us a Kate, and now Kate has given us a Marci to love for the rest of our lives."

Thank You Lord Jesus, Creator of New Life...God of Hope.

You do give "honey" from the rock.