

MONA'S LIFE

(Abridged eulogy delivered 04/13/19)

STRICKEN

The chair is empty. Just as the cross is empty, the chair is empty. Just as Christ overcame the cross, so Mona overcame that chair. Both transformed events of incomprehensible sorrow, into a demonstration of God's love and faithfulness.

In August 1956, Mona was on the cusp of woman hood. Everything she had yearned for all her life was opening before her. She was grown up. She was an adult. She was in College. She was independent and self-reliant. She was enveloped in a community of friends who loved and admired her, just as she loved and admired them. She was engaged to be married. She would have children of her own to love, and to nurture, and to cherish, just as she had been loved, and nurtured, and cherished. She could have been a concert pianist!

But, on that August afternoon, she had a headache. When she got home, the headache was worse. She went right to her room. She asked her mother to draw the blinds because the light hurt her eyes. Three days later, returning from the bathroom, she had trouble walking. She knew something was terribly wrong. In the afternoon, she had trouble breathing. She was rushed to St Luke's hospital. At first, they thought it was encephalitis. It was not. It was polio. They put her in an iron lung. And, saved her life.

WARM SPRINGS

Six months later, in the Spring of 1957, she was sufficiently recovered to travel to Warm Springs, GA. She described her state of mind at that time as "numbed bewilderment." She thought that if she followed the doctor's orders, worked hard with determination, and was persistent, that what had happened would just be an interruption, that she would be able to resume her life.

At that time, Warm Springs had tremendous experience rehabilitating those stricken with polio, and all of that understanding and practice was invested in Mona. They taught her how to use appliances to feed herself pudding and peas, how to "frog breathe" so she could cough, how to use a mouth stick to dial a phone, how to write long loopy notes home, and how to sign her name. They had even fitted her for leg braces because, "Everyone who comes to Warm Springs gets fitted for leg braces."

No one at Warm Springs had promised her a full recovery, and she had seen people less affected than her going home in wheel chairs and iron lungs. One day, the reality hit, she would never play the piano again. An essential part of her self-expression had been lost. More even than walking, Mona needed to play the piano. And the grief crashed over her. It came in wave after wave after wave. It was unrelenting. For days and days, she wept, and she wept, and she wept. Nonetheless, this was a point of healing, an acceptance of loss. She returned her engagement ring. She gave her typewriter to her brother.

After 7 months, Mona had worked hard, and regained much, but she had grown homesick and just wanted to be home, to sleep in her own bed. She persuaded the review board of all the progress she had made, reminding them that on arrival, all she could do was scratch her nose. They were impressed. There was no denying the severity of the polio, but everything that could be done for her had been done. So, they released her to her new life.

We have two pictures of her arrival home taken by her Uncle Cliff. In the first, her father is carrying Mona in his arms up the walk to the house, Mona smiling and happy and so obviously glad to be home. In the second, Mona is in the living room still smiling and still very happy, surrounded by the bags, suitcases, and clutter of travel, with a pair of leg braces behind her on the couch, never to be used.

A NEW NORMAL

For the next decade and a half, Mona lived with her family and they found a "a new normal." Fortunately, her family was stable, well rooted in church and community, so they had abundant support and encouragement. Her mother was a dynamic person who willing laid down her life for Mona, and who had many many friends who also contributed to Mona's care, never counting

the cost. Her father was a devoted provider and quiet faithful caretaker. Her brother Dick was a best friend and confidante, someone she could depend on for understanding and good humor.

So, in the 1960's, she and her family attended Church and participated in cultural activities. She attended friend's showers, weddings, baptisms, and funerals, and worked at small part-time jobs, TV monitoring, a greeting card and invitation business, entered advertising contests (and won a few).

She also read and studied with a limitless curiosity. She enjoyed going where her mind took her; no assignments; no tests; no grades. Just the satisfaction of unbounded independent unstructured learning. Going through her things from that period, I have found (display books) *Elements of Harmony* (no surprise there), C. S. Lewis *The Problem of Pain*, poetry, the books *How to Make Extra Money in Your Spare Time* and *101 Practical Ways to Make Money at Home*, Choice Theory, and many other books on psychology and the mind.

BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

Her most active life, though, was in her mind and concerned an undefined future. Visions of her own apartment and transportation, a meaningful career, and marriage occupied her imagination. She thought these nothing more than daydreams, but they served a purpose, they whetted an appetite for a larger purpose driven life.

What Mona did not realize, was that she was between two worlds. The normal world of the able bodied, or A.B.s as she called them, which she desired, and wished, and hoped she could belong, where her past competencies were remembered and respected; and a different world, a new world, where contributions were needed that only she could make.

It was early in this period that Mona completed the painting here on the table beside me. Her friend Marion Houghton arranged the still life and painted the commode on which the pieces rest, but Mona painted everything else. The three objects represent the things that Mona most admired and valued at that time. The books represent knowledge, the pen and ink, scholarship, and the bust of Beethoven, culture, music, and her piano. We never discussed this, but knowing her as I do, if the painting represents what Mona most valued—and felt was worth pursuing—it would not have sustained her. She would have remained feeling unsatisfied and unfulfilled, until she found that new and higher purpose worthy of her devotion. This painting is incomplete. The painting belonged to the world of her past, from which she had to emerge, and find a new future.

A SEARCH FOR FAITH

A dear friend entered her life, and with his help Mona began to confront the truth of her reality. This emotional stimulation, and subsequent emotional confusion when he left, catapulted Mona into a search for meaning and purpose. Mona began wrestling with a search for faith, what to believe about God. Her background had prepared her for this search. An active Church life growing up. In college, she had completed course work on comparative religions and psychology. Her broad reading had exposed her to wider philosophies and thinking.

This search culminated in a crisis of faith. At Christmas Time, she became ill with a pulmonary infection. Just then, a great choking cough started in her chest that she could not clear. Her airway was blocked. Her father was in the next room but could not hear her. She was in deep trouble. She turned to God, and demanded proof of His existence, a personal revelation. "If you are real, you had better do something now or I am going to die." The room was bright and quiet as she took a tiny sip of air through her nose. She was clear. She took several deep breaths and sighs of relief. Not a rattle nor a wheeze. Was this really God, or just good fortune? Was it mere coincidence? Does it matter? She had turned to the Lord, and she could breathe. And, because of that, she believed and gave herself over to Him completely.

So, what was absent from the painting, what had been missing from her world, was Christ. The canvas on which she would now paint, would be her life, using all the colors of faith. She sought her calling with determination.

THE NEW WORLD

Mona had been shunning those who were disabled. She had worked to persuade herself that She was not like the others she had met at Warm Springs. She was different. She was unique. She was special. She shunned the company of the handicapped. Then, In the mid-1960's, Mona had come across a funky little rehab newsletter called The Toomey J. Gazette, which was filled

with disabled people like her doing improbable things like running a business from an iron lung. Mona began to dream of a future, one of independence, one where she was not “disabled,” but “differently abled.”

Strangely, it was just at this time that she met new friends at a concert, disabled people, who welcomed her into their midst with friendship and warmth. To her surprise, she liked them, and accepted their invitation to their next club meeting. On fire for the Lord, she began to prod them. We can do better than drink beer, chat, and play games, she insisted. Someone took the bait, and got in touch with the National Paraplegic Foundation, and with their help Mona and her new friends became a chapter. During her five years on the board, they set and achieved two goals: compile and distribute a guide on accessibility to architects and obtain a city ordinance with a mandatory requirement for curb cuts as streets were repaired. The chapter evolved into *The Whole Person*, a dynamic organization which continues to exist grow today as an advocate for all the disabled in the Kansas City. In subsequent years, she served on the board of the *Coalition for Independence* which coordinates direct aid and assistance for the disabled, and when I met her, she was amongst the first to volunteer at Abounding Love, Colonial Church’s ministry to those with developmental disabilities.

CALLED TO SERVICE

What would happen next is, Mona would lose her father--the only provider she had ever known--the family home would be sold and Mona and her mother would move, with the consequent distancing from the church and community in which her family had always been a part, her family would disperse, and Mona would start her life’s work.

In 1972, Mona’s father was diagnosed with Cancer. In the three months he had between May and August of 1972, Mona’s father sold their house, invested the proceeds to ensure the family had income, and moved them to a coop housing development in the suburbs. In his last act, as he had done in life, Mona’s father had provided for his family as best he could.

The home had less maintenance and therefore was much easier to care for, and Mona and her mom had a trusty little VW bus her brother had brought back from Germany, so they got around a lot and had many friends and met new neighbors. They did not stay there very long. An old family friend from Chicago visited Mona’s mother and renewed acquaintance. He had lost his wife years before but did not know Ella Ruth had lost hers. A close friendship developed rapidly and culminated in a marriage proposal. Her new husband travelled incessantly for his work, and Ella Ruth wrestled with how to care for a daughter she thought would be dependent forever.

Mona, however, perceived this as an opportunity to live out her life’s dream of living independently. Paraphrasing her thoughts, “After much consultation with God, and counting the personal cost as realistically as possible, I determined to stay in Kansas City, and establish a household of believers as an experiment designed both to meet resident’s needs, and to demonstrate the desirability of Christian precepts for healthful peaceful living.”

This proposal was not met with universal acclaim.

At this time, Mona’s ability to care for herself was still limited to self-feeding and brushing her teeth. Skills such as writing, typing, or telephoning still required someone to put on or setup equipment. It took a month of negotiation with her mother, while two health professionals, fellow Christians, and supposedly good friends, advised that, “She should be put in a nursing home,” “She can’t possibly do it,” and “It will never work.” In the end, Mona’s mother Ella Ruth and Mona agreed her mother would get married, and Mona would stay in the coop for a year before moving back into the city and a larger house where she would trade lodging for care.

In November 1973, the experiment began. Her financial resources were very meagre (let me say again, very meagre), but she considered it an interesting challenge and was determined to be a good steward with what God gave her. Through creative bargaining and a naturally frugal nature, she rarely felt needy and always had tithes and offerings for her God, and small gifts for those in need. For years, her part time help consumed 50% of her income, and she was amazed how everything came out of the rest.

In that first year there were times when Mona did not know where her next bedpan would come from (one morning, a stranger, some neighbor's mother-in-law, appeared out of a snow storm) but God always provided, such that, and I am quoting here, "...It was sometimes hard on my nerves, but that year was good for my faith."

Now bear in mind, Mona's purpose was not just to be able to tend to herself, but to bear witness and minister to others. So, with some help from friends and relatives, she found and bought a house down at 55th and Oak in Kansas City two blocks from a vibrant church named Agape that she wanted to join. In that house, Mona established a hospitality ministry for starving bachelor's and a place for lonely people to drop in for fellowship. She volunteered to take calls for a job placement service organized by the neighborhood Presbyterian church. Importantly, she provided living space for up to 6 young women at a time from the Church who exchanged personal care for lodging. These ministries continued over a period of 8 years or more and several more home moves. Many visitors and associates marveled at the harmony and peace in the home, and its open gracious loving hospitality.

There were disappointments. Mona had hoped to go to Israel, but with a series of health crises, Mona's strength, and stamina declined, resulting in a return to sleeping in the Iron Lung.

Nonetheless, Mona had pleasant memories of these years, filled as they were with many new and enduring friends, children, music, fellowship groups, and strolls in a new electric chair acquired with the help of Medicare.

When asked about her motivation, Mona would say it was an opportunity to live out her faith, to translate her Christian beliefs into daily living and thereby be obedient to God and put maximum effort into what she thought he wanted her to do. In her words, "The success of this experiment became a necessity for my personal integrity and a point of honor to win for my God. He keeps his promises. He is faithful."

GOD'S PROMISE

And then, she got married! Early in her walk with Christ, the Lord had given her a word: she would be given a husband. She did not understand how that could ever happen, but she was obedient, and began studying the bible to determine the traits and attributes of a Godly wife and began practical study to prepare herself for marriage.

And, God gave her a husband. He gave Mona a life partner, a soul mate, someone she could love, and cherish, and nurture, and comfort, and uplift, and confide in, and encourage. Someone she could love with all her heart. Someone who would love her, and cherish, and nurture, comfort and encourage and protect her; someone who would provide for her such that she would want for nothing; and love her with all of his heart; and care for her all the days of her life. And, in so doing, God showed he kept his promises. Through Mona's faith and belief, everything that had been taken from her, had been returned. All that the locusts had eaten, had been restored. God is faithful. God keeps his promises.

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