

**THE DEATH AND LIFE OF LUCINDA WIK : 1918-2008**

Philip Wik



*God gives us love. Something to love  
He lends us; but, when love is grown  
To ripeness, that on which it throve  
Falls off, and love is left alone.*

On December 1st, 2008, at 5:40 pm, while I held my mother's hand and as she was gazing at her husband of 56 years, her spirit took flight to Heaven.

**Prologue**

For most of my mother's 90 years, she has had an active life, more so than people decades her junior. For example, when she was 77, she amazed us by going on Disney's well-named Tower of Terror. Mom loved hikes and road trips-- not just to places like the Willow Grove Mall and Longwood Gardens-- but also on cross-country trips to family reunions, flights to Australia, and a trip I recall with fondness-- to Illinois to spend time with us when our second son Ben was born in 1996. These trips brought Mom pleasure and she brought pleasure with her to other people. But the physical consequences were stern.

Mom suffered from bad circulation producing ulcerated legs. She would groan as she folded our socks and washed our dishes, even while insisting that she must fold our socks and wash our dishes. In the last few years, Mom visited many specialists, but none were able to eradicate the root causes of Mom's suffering.

2008 was a year of crisis. In our weekly call to my parents on March 3rd, Nancy and I discerned that Mom was sounding groggy and disoriented-- slurring words and repeating sentence fragments. But she seemed to recover. Three weeks later, however, she had her first stroke, experiencing numbness in her left leg and partial paralysis on her left side. Mom was briefly hospitalized and was released by the time I flew out to see her on April 16th. On the morning that I saw Mom, she slipped in the bathroom and was again taken to Abington Memorial for evaluation. In time, Mom made progress first at Dresher Hill Rehabilitation and later at Calvary Fellowship Homes. On October 12th, Mom celebrated her 90th birthday. In the last week of October, Mom expressed a yearning to see her home of 25 years in Roslyn and also her son Tim's new condo. But during this trip, she again fell. On November 11th at Lancaster General, Mom had surgery to release the pressure of bleeding on her brain. It appeared at first that the operation was a success. She ended my call to her that week by saying "Good by dear Philip. I love you." But within two weeks, her verbal skills degraded. But she was able to respond to "I love you. Nancy loves you. Zach loves you. And Ben loves you" with "ditto, ditto, ditto, ditto." Those were the last words I heard her speak to me. Mom fell into a stupor and seemed to have signs of pneumonia.

By November 23rd, Mom was unresponsive, close to death, and sustained by a feeding tube. I flew out Thanksgiving Day, traveling from Phoenix to Lancaster. By this time, as mandated by her living will, the feeding tube was removed. Mom was again back at Calvary Fellow Homes among the terminally ill patients not too far from Dad's apartment.

### **Calvary Fellowship Homes**

My father lives in an efficiency unit with a refrigerator, oven, and a walk-in closet that has his desk and a pull-up apparatus that my brother Paul made. It is close to the office and dining hall and near to chapels and meeting areas. CFH is a complex of more than 30 acres with generally newer ranch-style town-homes. Lancaster is a city of brick homes and well-maintained Amish farms. The 80 year-old Amtrak station is a bit over a mile from CFH. The staff is kind and competent, the food is hearty and wholesome (with forays into regional Pennsylvanian recipes such as sherbet and pretzels and rhubarb pie). There are plenty of ongoing daily activities much like you would get on a cruise ship. These include volunteer activities, choirs, and crafts. Perhaps some of these may help ease Dad's loneliness in time. CFH has some of the same elegant ambiance of The Holmstad in Batavia, Illinois, (the home of my uncle and aunt Anderson for many years) with its floral accents, upscale furniture, and Christian staff. Colored lights festoon trees outside and many of the public areas have garlands, poinsettias, and well-ornamented

Christmas trees. For 45 years, Overseas Missionary Fellowship retirees spent their sunset years at Lammenuir near CFH, an institution that closed a month or so ago. The verse from Psalms 46:1 "God is our refuge and strength" is prominently displayed on a sign near the entrance of CFH.

At the age of 93, Dad is frail and arthritic. He struggles with hearing. However, Dad can still carry a conversation over the telephone. While he still is able to drive, the risks are such that he seldom does so. Dad would like to visit his home church monthly, which is more than 80 miles away. He generally spends his time memorizing scripture and likes attending prayer and church meetings. Dad would surely covet any kind of contact from friends and family, including personal visits, telephone calls, and cards or letters. Here is my father's contact information:

Harold Wik  
c/o Calvary Fellowship Homes  
Lancaster, PA  
17601  
(717) 824-8919

### **Mom's Last Four Days**

Mom shared room S-37 with another resident. Mom was next to a large picture window looking out over a garden. On another wall was a framed picture of Jesus. In many respects, her room was a microcosm of her life-- the antique china cabinet filled with mementos from around the globe, the black and white blanket that warmed her with stitching of cats-- Mom so loved cats!-- the window sill with its potted vines and plants, and, most importantly, the cards from her many friends and photographs of her grandchildren and great grandchildren. Her Bible and glasses were on the table. In the corner, a birthday balloon slowly deflated. Dad's apartment was no more than a few minutes away. Sometimes, a tape recorder would play classical or gospel music.

### **Friday, November 28th**

I saw Mom briefly the night before just after I arrived. Dad spoke so tenderly to his wife: "Hello, my love. Hello, my dove. You are my earthly sweetheart. God is with you. Your son Philip is here from Arizona." He then recited Psalm 23, perhaps reminding both of us that our life here is not all green pastures and still waters. And with a wavery voice he sang "Surely Goodness and Mercy Shall Follow Me", knowing that the mother of his four children "will dwell in the house of the Lord forever" so very soon.

On Friday morning, I again went with Dad to see Mom. This time, her eyes fluttered open and she strained to say something from her parched throat. More precious than a diamond was what I saw on her eyelash-- the glint of a diamond-like tear. The head nurse told me that Mom still had a lot of life, that her hearing was good, that we should try

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to orient her with information, that there still may be bleeding on the brain, and that she was getting morphine every four hours.

The family had cautioned me about Mom's appearance. But to me Mom had an ethereal beauty, with a skin that was radiant. Her dehydration may well have melted a half decade of strain from her face. She didn't seem to be in any pain so far as I could tell. Mom wore a burgundy bandana to cover the small part of her scalp that had to be shaved for the surgery. But she had most of her hair, and her hair had much of the same dark color and flaxen texture that she had when she was much younger. As I watched her slumber, purring under Anne's cat blanket, the poem from Alfred Lord Tennyson a verse of which I quote earlier came to mind:

*Sleep sweetly, tender heart, in peace;  
Sleep, holy spirit, blessed soul,  
While the stars burn, the moons increase,  
And the great ages onward roll.*

### **Saturday, November 29th**

The nurse told us that her kidneys were failing, and that we should expect death soon after if that was to happen.

Dad opened a treasure house of memories later that evening with me, telling me stories about his courtship with Mom, the wedding and the honeymoon, and their early years in Malaya.

### **Sunday, November 30<sup>th</sup>**

Sunday dawned cold and wet. Mom's blood pressure at 9 am was 88/66 with a pulse of 77. A nurse had refreshed her bed and tucked under the covers next to her curls a small teddy bear. It reminded me of Rupert, the bear I cherished when I was a little boy in Rawang, Malaysia. The nurse remarked in what would make a fine epitaph that Mom "was a very nice person." As to why someone who was so nice would have to suffer from strokes, fractures, back pain, paralysis, pneumonia, venous stasis, ulcers, methicillin-resistant staphylococcus aureus, atrial fibrillation, bleeding on the brain, dehydration, starvation, and only God knows what else is a question as old as the Book of Job. Mom once said to me that "she must have done something very bad" to be in such pain—pain that she equated with childbirth—but I would have none of that. Later, she said that "at least I know where I am going" and she tried to live her last days with dignity and joy in institutions that were often devoid of dignity and joy. "When the master plucks a flower," Dad said, "the gardener holds his peace." Perhaps, like Job, all we are left with is wondering silence and faith. "I will lay mine hand upon my mouth." Later that day, I later had a long, cleansing conversation on this and on other topics with the hospice chaplain in Mom's room.

**Monday, December 1<sup>st</sup>**

It was another chilly, dreary day with low-hanging gray clouds that scudded over the leafless trees. In the mid-afternoon, an autoharp musician “Songs For the Journey”—a ministry for the terminally ill—sang and played for Mom. On her zither-like instrument, her fingers danced over the wires as she sang “What A Friend We Have in Jesus,” “Blessed Assurance”, and “Amazing Grace”. Mom loved nature. And, for as long as I have known her, she has enjoyed gardening. So I’m sure Mom was especially touched by “In the Garden”:

*I'd stay in the garden with Him  
 Though the night around me be falling  
 But he bids me go through the voice of woe  
 His voice to me is calling  
 And He walks with me, and He talks with me  
 And He tells me I am His own  
 And the joy we share as we tarry there  
 None other has ever known.*

It was at this point that the head floor nurse informed us that Mom had entered the stage of “active dying.” Her breathing was becoming labored from a build-up in her lungs, Tylenol was having no effect on her 101 degree temperature, and her skin was starting to become sallow and mottled. I called Paul and he arrived at three with Joyce, their daughter Rebekah, and her children Lucinda and Valentine. Paul and Joyce sang hymns and also read from the Psalms. At five, Dad and I were called to supper and I went back to see Mom at 5:20. Mom was alone in her room, with the others having left to eat as well. Mom’s eyes were wide open, and she was rapidly gulping, hyperventilating as organs throughout her body were shutting down. I was so glad Dad joined me moments later. I was holding her hand and I could feel her pulse ebb and then stop at 5:40. I ran for the nurse who confirmed what we knew. I called Joyce, Wayne, and Tim: “Mom has gone to Heaven!” For the first time in my life, I saw my father cry—perhaps from the desolation that he felt at that moment as the love of his life had left him for now and also from the realization that the pain that Mom had endured had finally come to an end and that now she was secure in a place where “there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain.”

Mom was by the side of her own mother when she died in 1981. Shortly after that, she wrote this poem “in loving memory of my mother.” And that is the way I want to remember my mother, not the way I saw her own her death bed, but in her beautiful prime:

*O Lord, Thank you for today and*

*for the happy memories of yesterday.  
 Help me to understand the mysteries of old age  
 and to rejoice in your countless favors.  
 I am keenly ware of my limitations  
 and dependence upon others,  
 but do give me a kind word  
 and smile for any who may come my way.  
 Save me from the critical fault finding habits  
 into which many old people fall.  
 As my mind takes pleasure in walking through  
 the corridors of the past, only let me go  
 loving, forgiving, and forgetting  
 any who have hurt or caused me pain  
 Help me to be wise, serene, patient, helpful, and unafraid  
 lest self-pity and anger take away  
 The peace of heart and joy of companionship  
 with you my God.*

*Thank you Lord Jesus.*

## **Epilogue**

On the evening that Mom died, at our evening prayers in his apartment, Dad read from I Corinthians 15. “O death, where is thy sting?” Mom’s long, meaningful life gives answer to that question—that her life was not in vain. Mom has died, but we know that isn’t the end and that Mom today is more alive than ever. As Dad puts it, “the compensations of our faith are many, and believers never say goodbye for very long.”

One of my favorite photographs is when I was about seven years old. It shows the four of us—Anne and Tim on one side of her and me and Paul on the other side--snuggled into bed while she read from *The Incredible Journey*, the story of the adventure shared by two dogs and a cat as they travel through the wilderness searching for their masters. I like that snapshot because it shows Mom’s love for us and her love for reading. At Berarchah, her home church, many words will be spoken in praise for her incredible journey, first as a highly-trained nurse and then as a missionary. But she was also a very human person, well aware of her own struggles and limitations, especially in trying to balance her desire to spread the Good News with her love for her children.

At the boarding school in Malaysia, tears of homesickness would scald my cheeks as I watched my parents’ car leave. It was only years later that I realized that my mother had the same tears. And so she dedicated the last quarter century of her life largely to her children, with her counsel and her encouragement as well as involvement in all kinds of fun activities with us. She saw that serving God could also mean hiking with her children, and that sometimes children should be seen and heard, and that sometimes the place to be for her children was not just on her knees but standing by their side. Behind the pulpit where many people will eulogize her is a single word with red letters: “Jesus.” I remember Mom making reference to that panel with that word just before she returned to the field one year— it was He for whom she lived for without condition. But she was also my mother as well, and that is how I will always remember her.

Dear Philip,

Thank you ever so much for sharing your reflection of your final hours with your mother.

You have written well and created for us a 'living picture'.

Thank you for sharing.

Now as you continue to walk through this valley of grief may you find comfort in looking at the cross – where needless suffering takes on a dimension of its own.

It has been a tough journey for you all and for you Philip, at a distance, I am sure that it has had its own toughness.

Obviously, issues from the past have risen and shaken you (again, no doubt, and will in the future too) like a cat shakes a mouse and the convolutions of life with its endless propensity to disaster have looked you in the face and have brought you pain.

I do pray that as you walk along this tough, tough road that you will be able to discover and rest in the reality of the Rom 8: 28 – that God is able to take the worst scenario of our life and give it a touch of his glory.

May the Lord comfort you and your family at this time.

Do be assured of my thoughts and prayers.

I will send your letter to Aunty Ruth who will miss her sister greatly,

Sincerely and with love,

Ruth Nicholls (Australian cousin)