

Speaking of endurance, I'd like to tell you about God's Word and my mother's last gift.

## Part III: Saying Goodbye to Mom

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### The Greatest Gift

On the night my mother died, I lay in bed and wept—not so much in grief, but in thanks for all the marvelous gifts she had given to enrich and sustain my life. Mom planted many beautiful seeds in me—seeds for which I am and will be eternally grateful. But of all the gifts she gave and all the seeds she planted, I believe her love for reading in general, and for reading God's Word in specific, were by far the best.

We had celebrated Kathryn Marie's seventy-sixth birthday in the hospital with cupcakes the day after she broke her hip. We blessed her and prayed with her when she decided to have the surgery, knowing her frail body might not survive, but knowing that spending the rest of her life in bed wasn't what she wanted either.

We laughed when, prior to the operation, the doctor asked, "Do you want us to attempt any extraordinary measures if something should happen during surgery and your heart should stop?" When Mom asked what the doctor meant, he said, "Do you want us to pound on your chest?" She thought for a moment, scratched her chin and replied, "Oh, maybe just a little. But don't go to any trouble."

Mom always had such a great sense of perspective. And humor. And direction. And faith. She knew where she was going. If she lived, she lived to the Lord, and if she died, she died to the Lord. As far as she was concerned, whether she lived or whether she died, she would be just fine.

We kissed, cried and prayed when Mom went into surgery. We cried and prayed again when she came out of the operating room wearing a full-faced oxygen mask but didn't wake up. We waited and prayed and hoped against hope as her kidneys began to shut down. We pleaded with her to open her eyes and say her goodbyes when her

grandchildren came into the room. We held our breath when her eyes fluttered open one last time to see them, and we thought we sensed a faint smile on her parched lips.

Then, one week and a day from her sterile cupcaked birthday party, we said our goodbyes and stood at the bedside as they took her off life support. The teacher, wife, mother and friend spent her last hours on this side of eternity surrounded by family as they watched, waited and sang her favorite hymns from one end of the songbook to the other all day long and into the night.

Exhausted, we took Dad home to get some rest at 10:30 PM, leaving baby sister Karen at Mom's bedside to keep watch through the darkness. An hour later we received the call. Mom was gone.

As I lay half-sleeping, half-weeping in thanks for such a mom as this, two things came to mind. First, all her life, the teacher had taught me how to live. And now with her death, she had taught me how to die.

## Mom's View of Daily Bread

My mother believed God's Word had power to accomplish great things. She made sure her children were in the pew with her and ready for Sunday School every Sunday. But worship and Sunday School weren't the end of our Christian education in the Melheim house. They were the start of a weeklong encounter with the Word.

Along with nightly prayers at the top of the stairs, Mom made sure the Word was central to our daily lives. To remind herself to do this, she kept a little brown plastic Daily Bread box in the middle of the kitchen table. There was bread, and then there was Daily Bread. Mom made sure we knew the value and always had the best of both.

Much to our later adolescent impatience and dismay, we literally couldn't get up from the table in our house until we shared a Scripture verse together from that little Daily Bread box, and then closed our mealtime with the prayer, "O give thanks unto the Lord; for he is good; for his mercy endureth for ever" (1 Chron. 16:34, *KJV*).

Digesting Scripture along with our meal and praying in thanksgiving before we dashed off was smart neurology. Studies show that

babies, the brain-damaged and your average teenager all learn in the same way. Messages must come to the brain loud, clear, repeated, reinforced and interconnected. With this simple ritual, Mom was able to instill in us something all adolescents (and adults acting like adolescents) could really use these days: an attitude of constant gratitude. If we balked, the Wisconsin farm girl-turned-teacher would simply smile, wink and whisper, “Only the pigs at the trough don’t stop to say thank you!”

Mom’s faith didn’t stop at the Bible. It started there and reached out to the hurting of the world. In my growing years, there wasn’t a Thanksgiving, Christmas or Easter that our dining table wasn’t filled with a dozen widows, widowers, college students, loners and strays. My sisters and I grew up spending every holiday setting up extra chairs, unfolding extra card tables, and waiting on these old wrinkled saints and loners. The dear Norwegian pietist could not even think of leaving the lonely alone on what could be the most depressing days of the year. We tried to be a family for them. A spiritual home. A little piece of their identity.

## Unspoken Sermons

Mom modeled her love for the Word through her actions, but also through a worn, marked, open Bible sitting in her sunroom. For 38 years as the pastor’s wife, she led women’s Bible studies in our parlor, in our basement and sometimes in our garage. Her favorite subject included dressing up and acting out the lives of women from the Bible—for which she had written 22 studies and skits. Her second favorite teaching topic was the Revelation of John.

When the Hal Lindsey crowd was predicting the eminent end of the world, Mom’s teaching was simple: “Look, Jesus said He didn’t even know exactly when the end was coming, so if God has let you in on it, I want to meet you. You must be smarter than Jesus!” And, “Whether the end of the world will come in 10 minutes or 10,000 years, I don’t know. The fact is, the end of *your* world is coming in your lifetime. You could get hit by a bread truck tomorrow. You need to get right with Jesus now!”

Mom's summary of the Revelation was simple: "Write these two words and an exclamation point under the book title in your Bible. These words are all you need to remember when your world is falling apart—Jesus wins!"

## The Whispered Song

After I received the phone call about my mother's death, I lay in bed, half asleep, half awake in prayer, thinking about her grace, face and faith. As I drifted in and out, the Holy Spirit whispered Scripture to my ear:

If we live, we live to the Lord and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's (Rom. 14:8).

Kathryn Marie believed this with all her heart. I fell asleep. About an hour later, I stirred again and woke to another whisper:

Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable (1 Cor. 15:51-52).

This second dream verse didn't come as words alone. It came with a melody. I rose and scratched the tune out on a notepad by the bed, and then drifted off again. A week after my mother's funeral, I gave it to Todd Ernster, a brilliant musical friend and founder of the Minnesota Music Hall of Fame band The Killer Hayseeds. Todd invited his lead singer, Ross Florand, into his studio, and the two spent a night turning it into a quiet country ballad. Ross was raised a Christian, but he didn't consider himself much of one at the time. But something about that verse hit him just right that night, and a silent seed was sown.

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Listen to the Scripture song for 1 Corinthians 15:51-52 at [www.faith5.org/extras](http://www.faith5.org/extras).

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Months later, Ross's own mother died. When the pastor visited the family before the funeral, he asked if there were any special Bible passages they would like to have read. No one had a Scripture in mind, so the pastor gave some options, including Romans 14:8 and 1 Corinthians 15:51-52. When Ross heard the words, "If we live, we live to the Lord," he recognized the verse and perked up. "Yeah, I know that one," he said. "I like that. Read that one."

As the pastor preached a powerful sermon about faith, hope and trusting in the love of God, the silent seeds grew. There, at his mother's funeral, Ross met the Living Word—Jesus—in the Living Word. After the funeral, he told his family and friends he would return to the Jesus who had never left him in the first place.

The Killer Hayseeds were stunned when, shortly after that, Ross's own heart stopped suddenly and unexpectedly. "It's ironic for someone with that big of a heart to have heart disease," our friend Todd wrote in Ross's obituary.<sup>35</sup>

## Planting Seeds

In Isaiah 55:10-11, the prophet Isaiah writes:

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

My mother's life planted God's Word in my heart while I was growing up, and my mother's death planted God's Word in my head. On the night she died, the Holy Spirit whispered the Word in a song. Later, the song planted itself in another son's head, and it returned at another mother's funeral. Then the Word took root in a

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Country Western singer's heart and brought him back to Jesus just before he died.

That song was a gift, but it wasn't my mother's last gift. There would be one more.

### The Morning After

The morning after Mom died, I awoke and stepped out into the sunroom porch where she always did her morning devotions. I sat down in her sacred sunroom space, a cup of coffee steaming nearby and the sunlight streaming through her window, and glanced down at her table. There, waiting for me in the center of a pile of a dozen spiral-bound notebooks, was our little brown Daily Bread box. A handwritten note scrawled on a yellow Post-It note read:

Richy Dear, in these binders you will find my notes on 22 women of the Bible. These pages include Bible studies, activities and skits I composed and taught over the last 50 years at church. I wonder if you'd finish them up for me and help me spread the Word? Maybe call it "Women of the Word" or "WOW!" Catchy title, don'cha think?

For the next 22 days, I typed up one of mom's studies each day and turned it into a Bible Study course called *WOW (Women of the Word)*. I had to do it. It was both my therapy and my way of saying one last thank you.<sup>36</sup>

May my brilliant teacher mom continue to teach from her grave.

### Home Huddle: How to Start

After a little exercise and sharing highs and lows, open your Bibles and immerse yourselves in a key Scripture story for the night. Verses

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Access the 22 WOW (Women of the Word) lessons by Kathryn Marie Melheim at [www.faith5.org/extras](http://www.faith5.org/extras).

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