



Nancy Tomlin Hartless

Philippians 2:1-8

Memorial Service, 03 July 2009

Grief is a very personal experience. We grieve not so much for those who have died or are removed from our presence. We grieve rather for our personal loss with the passing of another. Death brings a certain finality to relationships. There is the possibility of picking up those relationships on the other side of death. In the meantime, however, we have lost the possibility of further memorable moments, as well as the opportunity to rectify broken relationships or complete some business we sense is unfinished. We grieve for ourselves and our sense of loss, even as we may celebrate the life and blessing another has brought into our own experience.

Before Nancy's husband Ed died many years back, he had Phil promise to care for Nancy. Phil took to the task, going above and beyond the call of duty. It was hard for him to make the decision to place her in assisted living. That's where family remembers Nancy's feet being clean for the first time. He was at Fairmont with her until 2am the morning she passed away. She slipped away peacefully around 7am.

Before entering assisted living, Nancy was always out in the garden getting hands and feet soiled with working plants and animals. Peter met her for the first time, thinking she was Julie's grandfather, as she was dressed as a farmhand. Until age 86, she could be found tending her cows. With a ball cap and ever dirty feet, she was at home in the garden and tending the animals. Lori brought some college friends around to visit. They had never seen cows before. "Is that a cow?" Nancy not only showed them the cows, but taught them the basics of milking. It was a highlight for the girls, returning back to school excitedly exclaiming about having gotten to milk a cow.

Nancy gave up milking her cows some 8 years ago. Her death, however, closes the final curtain on those activities. There will be no more new memories of her losing patience with a cow swatting her with its tail or kicking over the milk bucket. Yet the memories her family and friends cherish may be stored and recalled for years to come.

Nancy was not afraid of anything. Lori came in one day to find her on the porch with a hand on the pistol in her pocket. "I thought I heard a noise. You go on back inside." She kept a shotgun handy to shoot blackbirds out of the cherry tree.

When she disagreed with someone, she would keep quiet. It was not her business to correct other. She never talked bad about anyone. She showed plenty of love to all she knew. Her granddaughters say she earned an A+ at goodness.

People from all over would come by, and she would load them up with butter and garden produce. They did not always have money to pay her for them, but she was more concerned they have what they needed. Hers was a very giving spirit, giving people anything she had to offer. For herself, she did not want to receive from others. After entering Johnson's, Lori asked what she wanted for Christmas, knowing Nancy would not tell her of any desires. "I have all I need," was her standard response. For the first time, she gave Lori an answer: "I want my family to come see me."

Nancy had only a First Grade education. She covered a lot of ground with it. She was the one to introduce her granddaughters to the Bible. She would read it to them until they were old enough to read. Then, she would have them read the Bible to her. She would often sit brushing Lori's hair as Lori read to her from the Bible.

She loved to play checkers and cards. The grandchildren would be over after school playing. If you won a game, you won it fair and square, as she never held back. When Ed's car drove up, the game pieces would suddenly be swept up and put into a drawer as she made her way into the kitchen to look busy at something else. Ed didn't like cards and checkers.

She could grow about anything, reviving any plant from the dead. She brought an orange tree back from Mexico and cultivated it in her yard. Nancy loved flowers. She had a big pile of sand in the yard one time. While the girls were not sure what it was for, it was soon covered in flowers.

Once when Lori was in the cherry tree, eating to her heart's content, Nancy would tell her they were going to make her ill, but she did not try to stop her, either. "Your mama's going to know what you've been doing. You are going to make yourself sick!" Then she would just laugh at Lori and let her carry on. She would allow a grandchild to eat 10 tomato sandwiches, though she might have planned on the tomatoes for supper. She might offer a warning, but she would let them go on and eat, knowing that fever blisters might be on the way. "Go on and eat it, if you want to."

Julie came home to find a snake in the bathroom. She stuffed a towel under the door and called Nancy. "I'm bringing my hoe and will be right there." Not finding the snake, she determined there had been none. Two days later, Phil found the snake hiding in the living room shag carpet.

Nancy kept all her family grounded. Her mantra was to put others always ahead of oneself. Everything else would then fall into place. She loved her family and gave them her unconditional support.

Philippians 2:1-8 summarizes much of Nancy's outlook and demeanor on life—the selfless love of Christ Jesus and placing others first. Such was her legacy. She placed the needs of others ahead of her own, seeking to embody the love of Christ Jesus. In humility, she accepted the human role of a servant, even as Jesus had taken the role as his own. Rather than placing herself first, she placed love first.

Hers may not have been an eloquent or nuanced faith, but it followed the heart of the gospel as evidenced in the life of Jesus. She took his example of living to heart and loved those around her. The love of God in Christ was sufficient grounding for her life. It gave Nancy a legacy to share with her friends and family. It gives us ample reminder of the sufficiency of God's love for us, as well.

Perhaps the best way to honor Nancy today would be to renew our own commitment to accept the love of Christ Jesus as sufficient guidance and direction for our own lives. As she taught friends and family the value of God's love, so may we honor her legacy of faith in following her example of allowing the love of Christ to touch others through us. Her life testified to a faith she lived. We could do much worse than to follow in her footsteps, even if the tracks were muddy at times. Jesus' feet were not always clean either. There were more important things that begged for his attention, like serving others with God's love. That's a great legacy and example to leave behind.

—*Christopher B. Harbin*