

A PUMP, AN OUTHOUSE, AND A REMARKABLE HOMECOMING

*“I was travelin’ west a buckskin on my way to a cattle run
‘Cross a little cactus desert under a hot blisterin’ sun
I was thirsty down to my toenails, stopped to rest me on a stump
But I tell ya I just couldn’t believe it when I saw that water pump
I took it to be a mirage at first, it’ll fool a thirsty man
Then I saw a note stuck in a bakin’ powder can
‘This pump is old,” the note began, ‘but she works so give’er a try
I put a new sucker washer in ‘er, you may find the leather dry ...*

***You’ve got to prime the pump, you must have faith and believe
You’ve got to give of yourself ‘fore you’re worthy to receive
Drink all the water you can hold, wash your face, cool your feet
Leave the bottle full for others, thank you kindly desert Pete’”***

Song, “Desert Pete”
The Kingston Trio, 1963

“Who can find a virtuous woman? For her price is far above rubies.”

Proverbs 31:10

My mom—a truly remarkable and virtuous woman—left the bottle “full” of spiritual water for everyone she met.

We buried my 92-year-old mom, Ruth Dean Wilson Akers, last week.¹

The visitation was Tuesday night and there was a long line at the funeral home to file in to pay their respects for my mom. My sister compiled a beautiful slide show presentation of pictures that depicted various scenes from my mom’s long life. As I said at the funeral service last Wednesday morning, if everyone my mom had influenced over the course of her life were gathered, the chairs would not only fill the funeral home’s room but adjacent buildings as well.

She was an ever-flowing fountain of living water.

In the various memories and remanences of my mom, three things stood out: her bold and consistent witness for Jesus Christ, her zest for life, and her laughter. I

¹ Mom’s obituary is available at the Anderson Funeral Home, Franklin, Ohio website. In my earlier missive entitled “Three Little Women,” I also included several personal memories of mom.

called mom's laughter infectious, Amy Dunn called it contagious. Both terms apply—my mom could light up any room with her smile and laugh, and once she started laughing no one was immune from joining her.

We tried to make mom's funeral service more like a homecoming celebration than a dreary occasion. There were songs—my mom loved to sing—and everyone was given the opportunity to speak about how mom had influenced their lives. The testimonies ranged from funny stories to touching, deeply personal accounts. Laughter mingled with tears. Among the many highlights: Vickie Sue (my oldest sister) talked about how many people confused her with mom; Patti Jo (Trish) led the singing and stressed mom's role as a biblical scholar (where else would the Lamb of God be born but a manger); Debbie remembered how mom instilled in her a love of dancing; and Katie (my youngest sister) read a touching tribute to mom and her accumulated crowns. My oldest daughter Kimberly read the scripture passage from Proverbs on the virtuous woman, and related two funny stories about mom: the first was when they went to a funeral service, only to find out that mom had no clue as to the identity of the deceased (“I wondered why I didn't recognize anybody”); and, during a walk up to the donut shop with mom, a belligerent person passed them on the sidewalk with insults and making obscene gestures (“I rebuke those words in the name of Jesus,” my mom said, telling Kimbo not to accept such words—after we returned to the college at Pippa Passes, Imogene scolded her for not cleaning her room, “I rebuke those words in the name of Jesus,” Kimberly replied). Patti and Norm's oldest daughter, Jennifer Joy, provided a smooth and professional message entitled “Lessons Learned from Grandma Ruth.” My youngest daughter Bethany—who had made the long drive despite being due any day—offered her own touching tribute to mom.

Mom's artwork was scattered throughout the funeral parlor.

Dad was there in a wheelchair. I'm not sure he remembers much about the ceremony.

“Sigh.”

I launched into the portion of the service inviting people to share their special memories by recounting that our family had lived in four houses during my lifetime. The first house was a remodeled garage across the yard from where grandma and grandpa Akers lived. (The government exercised eminent domain and took the original farm and homeplace—the bridge where Pennyroyal Road crosses I-75 is where the lane used to be). I have four memories from those days: large groups of family friends playing croquet under the lights with homemade ice cream; our family's first television (a large cabinet with a small black-and-white screen); a pasture full of metal and wire sentinels—“fox pens”—as far as the eye could see (before the Great Depression hit, my grandpa Wiley had the largest

collection of silver and gray fox east of the Mississippi River); and, my mom sitting on the doorstep feeding lambs (a picture of that scene was included in the slide show).

Our second house was a small wooden structure located in a row of houses rented out by Aunt Martha (dad's sister). The house was very small—Vickie and I slept in one room, mom and dad's bedroom was in another, a small living room with a fuel oil stove in the middle and a small kitchen. The essentials of my worldview were shaped in that house. One night there was a terrible storm. I had a nightmare and couldn't sleep. Mom came in and hugged me: from that night on, I never had any doubt about my mom's love for me—despite how bad I would mess up, how far away from God I would drift, or how poorly I responded to life's twists and turns—I knew mom cared and would be praying for me.

That small house was full of larger-than-life memories: I waited for Santa Clause by sleeping with a blanket on top of the stove one Christmas Eve, mom taught me how to dance in the kitchen, and late one night, our neighbor banged on the door and cried “oh my God Bill, I've shot my wife!” (Betty laid there in a pool of blood as dad and mom tried to stop the bleeding until the ambulance arrived). My first dog—a small boxer named Princess—contracted the mange and dad had to shoot her. We couldn't afford a veterinarian.

To make matters worse, our house was located alongside a sharp curve in the highway (Route 48) and we witnessed more than our share of bad accidents.

There were two other special things about the house: the old-fashioned metal pump located on the sidewalk in back of the house and the outhouse. We didn't have indoor plumbing. As a result, priming the pump was an ever-present reality of our lives: mom used well water to cook with, to fill the large corrugated tub for our family bath night (being the first to take a turn in the tub became one of life's little pleasures), and for water to drink or to mix the Kool-Aid.

I cannot imagine an early childhood without a pump out back.

Nor without an outhouse. A warm inside bathroom deprives one of the unique experience of a cold winter draft of air on one's bottom before wiping with magazine pages (a thick Sears and Roebucks catalogue was essential). Indeed, it is hard for me to think of a youthful life without the pungent smells of the “honey wagon” to empty the outhouse—especially on a hot summer day.

My children and grandchildren have been deprived!

I relayed one special outhouse-related experience with those at the funeral. While living in the small frame house, we visited family friends nearby and I was run over by a truck (I wrote about this experience in detail in my missive, “Springboro's Treasure Trove of Memories” last month). Dad and mom would put me in Aunt Martha's bathtub—the only one in the neighborhood—where I soaked my squashed leg muscles in an epsom salt bath. Over time, I was able to walk but

couldn't run. I was on a Little League baseball team before the accident. The league granted me a special waiver to have a courtesy runner. I was a pitcher. Day-after-day it was mom, with her back against the outhouse for a backstop, that caught my pitches as I built my strength ...

“Sigh.”

Our two other houses—the Pence House on Main Street in Springboro and the red-brick ranch house in Royal Oaks—I have written about on other occasions.

At mom's graveside ceremony, I read a small piece I found in one of mom's memory books (I think it was compiled by Uncle Ralph and Aunt Kay). The wording was found on the cot of an African native, a believer, following his death. I think it perfectly describes my mom:

“I am part of the fellowship of the unashamed. The die is cast; I have stepped over the line; the decision has been made. I am a disciple of His; I won't look back, let up, slow down, back away or sit still. My past is forgiven, my present makes sense, and my future is secure. I'm finished and done with sight-walking, small planning, smooth knees, colorless dreams, tamed visions, mundane talking; and dwarfed goals. I no longer need prosperity, position, promotions, plaudits or popularity. I don't have to be first, tops, recognized, praised, regarded or rewarded. I now live by grace, walk by faith, learn by patience, lift by prayer and labor by His power.”

Amen.

Rest in peace mom.

Thank you for sharing your love and spiritual DNA with us ...