

THREE LITTLE WOMEN

“I’ve got the key to my castle in the air, but whether I can unlock the door remains to be seen.”

Louisa May Alcott,
Little Women

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

Proverbs 31:10

I don’t know why it has taken me so long to write this missive.

As I look back over the course of my life, I am just starting to realize the amazing and assorted group of individuals that God has planted at each of the major crossroads of my life. In this short piece, I’d like to introduce you to three extraordinary women who have influenced my life: I could have easily expanded this list to include dozens of others (including my wife, daughters and sisters). The three women mentioned below share two characteristics in common: they are each diminutive in size, but each—in their own way—are spiritual giants.

Several days ago, during my three-day struggle to declutter my roll-top desk (which I bought with my Ohio Vietnam Veteran’s Bonus), I stumbled across an old black-and-white photograph of three people: Dr. June Buchanan, known to all of us on the Alice Lloyd College campus as “Miss June,” Dr. Jerry Davis (long-time President of the College of the Ozarks but then President of Alice Lloyd) and myself. A much shorter Miss June, then well into her nineties, stood between us holding the book “This Is Your Life June Buchanan.” We had just finished filming a tribute to Miss June (1982) in the college library auditorium.

It was a magical evening.

Mr. Ralph Edwards was among the honored guests. For those of you too young to remember, Mr. Edwards hosted one of the country’s most popular television programs, “This Is Your Life.” The program (it ran on *NBC* television from 1952 to 1961, the heyday of black-and-white tv), featured guests who had lifted themselves from impoverished circumstances to positions of importance, or more often, heart-tugging stories of individuals who successfully overcame difficult odds. Among the program’s highest rated shows was an episode featuring Alice Lloyd, a physically handicapped lady who made the difficult trek by train,

wagon and mule from Boston to remote Caney Creek, in the isolated mountains of eastern Kentucky, to establish a Wilsonian-era community center and school.

One of the young women who responded to Alice Lloyd's initial pleas for volunteers was June Buchanan, daughter of a wealthy New York businessman and a recent graduate of prestigious Radcliffe College. Miss June can be seen on the original film of the 1955 program, gently smoothing Alice Lloyd's lace collar. When I taught the Philosophy 300 class on campus, I would show the vintage film—using an old projector—every semester.

At the end of the program, Ralph Edwards himself appealed to the television audience, particularly female viewers to “reach into their purses and hearts” to send money to help fund Alice Lloyd's vision. In the weeks that followed the tiny post office in Pippa Passes was inundated with bags of letters. Many of the ladies that sent those letters became regular donors of the school and were responsible for the financial underpinning of the school in the years that followed.

In the early 1990's, Dr. Jerry Davis asked me to begin a college preparatory high school on campus. We named the school in honor of June Buchanan. It was only fitting. In the early years of the school, I so enjoyed walking with the students by Miss June's house—a small, modest stone dwelling in the middle of campus—where she would, on many occasions, greet the kids from her porch.

Those are special memories for the kids (and for me).

I loved having Miss June, though she was aged and very frail, as a guest speaker in my college classroom. She inspired my students in a way no one else could. She once told me that a good teacher should “take the students to the moon and back every day.” She had the ability to do just that.

When I speak about Miss June these days, I use her life to illustrate the value of giving your life to something more important than yourself: she deprived herself of a life of wealthy indulgence to live the most spartan of conditions in her little house. She loved the students of the mountains and they returned the feeling.

When I was the college's PR director, I would make my way up the rickety wooden steps to Miss June's office—the “Eagle's Nest”—which she always kept very hot, like Saharan Desert hot! I loved to hear her stories. Miss June's secretary, Rilda Watson, occupied the office next door. On occasion, Miss June had a tendency to embellish the story a bit; in such circumstances I would glance at Rilda, who would either nod in affirmation or shake her head if Miss June's account was a bit too fanciful (of course, always out of Miss June's sight!).

Ah, the memories.

One Western Civilization class session, I had the class dress up in togas and typical Roman garb. Of course, I dressed up for the occasion as well! Miss June heard about it and summoned me to her office. I stood in front of her desk not sure what to expect. “Mr. Akers,” she began, in a tone used to gently dress down a

subordinate, “I’m sure the only reason an educated young man like yourself wouldn’t wear a tie to class is because you don’t have enough ties.” With that, Miss June reached into her desk drawer and pulled out a Medusa-like tangle of ties, all of which were twenty years out of fashion, and handed them to me. “Thank you, Miss June,” I said, retreating from her office and her glare like a whipped puppy dog.

After that conversation, I always wore a tie to class.

Miss June liked to sing a song and recite poetry to the Board of Trustees at their campus meetings. The gesture added a touch of charm missing elsewhere. Of course, there was the time when Miss June and Rilda—both elderly stubborn women—wrestled furiously over a bunch of papers to be handed to Trustee members; each of the Board members, so I am told, looked up at the ceiling or otherwise refused to watch the spectacle as it unfolded.

Sigh.

Miss June dedicated her life and resources to the people of the mountains: Jim Bergman told me once that he had seen foreign dignitaries bow in respect before Miss June’s desk in the Eagle’s Nest. As they should have.

A few years ago, I was introduced to a lady who reminded me of Miss June in terms of her total commitment to the young people of a region and the extraordinary power of her vision. Her name is Danita Estrella Watts. She heads an organization called “Danita’s Children,” which feeds, shelters and provides spiritual guidance for local children in northeastern Haiti.

I love listening to Danita tell her story. When Danita was 11 years old, she travelled with her father to Haiti. 25 years later, she packed her bags, left her church and home in Florida, and with just a \$200 dollar a month commitment from her home church, arrived in Haiti. She depended on God to show her what to do next.

When she saw a Haitian child get beaten for begging for food, she began an orphanage for unwanted and abandoned kids. She began with only a handful of kids and very little money.

Like Miss June, Danita is very small in stature. She speaks with a quiet, almost mouse-like, voice. When I visited the orphanage with a team from the College of the Ozarks, I had to pressure her to tell her story. Danita is content to let others tell her story for her. She doesn’t like to shine the light of attention on herself. It’s a genuine modesty. That’s what makes her so special.

Everything she has accomplished, she told me one time, is all due to God.

Danita is the living embodiment of the power of a God-given vision. In the very early days of her orphanage, a journalist from *Charisma* magazine heard about Danita’s story and visited her in Haiti. The rent on the house where she

housed the children was due: during the interview, Danita and the writer shared a dinner of spam with candles on the boxes that served as a table. But her vision burned within her: “God is going to build a hospital there, a church there, dormitories for the children there,” Danita said gesturing with her arms.

The writer could see nothing but an empty field. And that field didn’t even belong to Danita.

Yet.

Now, Danita’s campus in the Haitian village of Ouanaminthe, near the border of the Dominican Republic, has a hospital, church, several dormitories and an administration building—all built without debt. The campus is an oasis in the middle of incredible local squalor and poverty (80% of the country lives on less than one dollar a day).

Only God.

Volunteers from megachurches in Lexington, Kentucky, Florida and Tennessee staff the hospital and dental clinic. Observing malnourished children that are brought to the hospital is truly a heart-rending experience.

Many years ago, there was a violent revolt in Haiti. Mobs of angry armed men were seeking out white foreigners to kill. Or worse. They came to the town where Danita’s campus is located. Local villagers formed a protective cordon around Danita and the orphanage. “She helps our children,” they shouted out. The men left.

We need more believers like Danita—and the power of their visions—in this troubled world of ours.

I would be completely remiss if I didn’t include my mother as one of the three most influential women in my life. Just like Miss June and Danita, mom is short in stature, but like the other two, she is a spiritual dynamo.

I owe Ruth Dean (Wilson) Akers a debt and spiritual legacy I can never fully repay. When I have a prayer request, I go to mom; when I have a question about scripture, I go to mom for her viewpoint; and, when life throws an unexpected curveball—as life is prone to do—I go to mom for advice, or a compassionate shoulder to lean on. After I got hit by a truck (squashed my leg muscles), it was mom who would play catch with me (by the outhouse) until I recovered.

My earliest special memory with mom was one night when we lived in a small wooden frame house next to a dangerous curve on Route 48. I had a terrible nightmare. She got out of bed to comfort me. I was always completely sure of mom’s love for me after that occasion.

Strange what we remember, huh?

We rented a huge house in the mountains near Gatlinburg, Tennessee, to celebrate mom’s ninetieth birthday. All the children, grandchildren, and great-

grandchildren attended, as well as friends and extended family members. It was a special gathering. But my mom was definitely the belle of the ball. One of her great-granddaughters put a cheap crown on her head. She sported it proudly the whole time.

Rightly so. She was queen for a day.

My mom has the world's most infectious laugh. Mom loves to tell jokes, but starts laughing before she can deliver the punch line. Then everyone laughs at her laughing. The cycle can last for up to an hour ...

She also has the world's weirdest sneeze: she winds up for ten minutes—making you think an explosion is coming akin to the wolf blowing the piggies' house down—followed up by a dainty “ker-choo.”

Before dad's deteriorating physical condition started requiring mom's 24-7 care and attention, she would take a daily morning walk up the street to a local donut shop and testify to anyone who walked in the door about the importance of surrendering their life to Jesus Christ. Her life is all about the Cross of Christ. It is genuine. Other people's conversion experiences are in black-and-white, my mom's was in the most vibrant colors and hues. Her faith has been a bulwark of strength to me and my sisters over the decades.

Mom's stories are family legends: like the time she went to the wrong funeral home, almost took out a milkman during her driver's test, or stuck her head out behind the curtain just when the photographer snapped a picture of someone else.

Ruth Akers is also an accomplished artist. She paints beautiful oils. Indeed, one of my proudest moments was when the Alice Lloyd College art department invited mom and I to put on a mother-son art show. We both thought it was a nice display.

For many years, mom painted and lettered school buses to help with the family income. She was good at it.

One of mom's greatest regrets is that she never was able to go to art school. Sigh.

Mom spent her younger years in Kentucky before grandpa gave up farming and moved to West Carrollton, Ohio, to work in a paper mill. Mom worked at waiting tables during her high school years and met dad at a dance hall in nearby Miamisburg. It hasn't been easy for her.

You need to know that also.

If you talk to my mom about her childhood, you are likely to hear the story about how she preached to all her dolls and stuffed animals. Knowing mom, I bet it was a heck of a sermon.