



REMEMBERING WITH JOY



Job 8:21

***“He will yet fill your mouth with laughter
and your lips with shouts of joy.”***

Dear Opal,

It is when walking across the dew-covered carpet of grass decked out in its new spring green splendor that the rebirth of a sleeping earth awakens us to new possibilities; promises from the Creator that enlightenment is foreseeable and a time of laughter awaits us after those we love have “gone home”.

Thus, rather than forever grieve their passing with tears of sadness, let us use the beauty of the earth as a miraculous tool for learning about the cycles of life. After all, each beloved family member lived for a season and was presented the opportunity of touching both friend and foe with actions of love and compassion.

Therefore, it is my hope that you will join me with the decision to look back on their lives with both grace and humor; a lesson that was demonstrated in my family with bravery and boldness, not only each day, but especially on Memorial Day.

Opal, each spring, without fail, the tiny ants were the first to send a reminder that Memorial Day was fast approaching when they could be seen chewing the wax from the bulging peony buds that held the blushing rose colored petals that were anxiously anticipating the moment when their perfumed fragrance would fill the air.

Without fail, after noticing this strange behavior performed by the busy little insects, it brought a tear to the eye that was quickly replaced by an enormous smile.

You see, not only was this perceived as a miracle by onlookers that the ants were always present and on time with the responsibility assigned to them by their Creator, but it would be a process that would last for only a short time and not appear until the following year.

However, family members that viewed this fascinating activity of the tiny ants would feel a surge of excitement and energy due to the realization that it was time to prepare for decorating loved one’s graves in the various cemeteries; a behavior that was thought by some folks as bizarre. They would frequently roll their eyes and proclaim, “AND.... YOU CALL THIS FUN?”

Quickly responding, the writer would retort, “Oh, yes! It has always been a hoot; a time when the family members joyfully adorned graves with fruit jars or tin cans filled with flowers from both the yards and fields; a prelude that set the stage for recalling both touching and humorous stories about each loved one.

Opal, early in the morning on Decoration Day, family members would scour their surroundings for blushing peony blossoms, pungent mock orange branches, multi-colored iris blooms, pink sweet william that grew by the creek, and wild smiling daisies, that when combined became nature’s bouquet.

As this important activity was transpiring, chatter from women’s voices could be heard flowing from kitchen windows as they quickly filled picnic baskets with tantalizing goodies that would be shared by family members as they sat under their favorite shade tree or along the river bank that provided sustenance for visiting every grave site; an all-day affair.

Then, upon arriving at the designated cemetery, the family would gather around each loved one’s grave and begin telling humorous stories that resulted in an eruption of laughter. Some examples of the stories are as follows:

Writer’s Grandfather



Meet the writer’s grandfather (Grandpa Bill), a person who was known to be a man of few words but a lover of jokes and humorous drama that, without fail, would prompt the same predictable response from him. When observing or hearing something that tickled his funny bone, he would throw his straw hat in the air, rub the top of his head and break into unrestrained hoots of laughter.

Once when participating in the family ritual of decorating graves, he noted that a former community member’s burial site was adorned with lettuce, radishes, and green onions. Studying it for a bit, he threw his old straw hat up into the air, rubbed his head and began laughing. Finally, having regained his composure, he commented, “I guess someone thought this “feller” was hungry and needed to get up and eat.” Of course, his reaction prompted fits of laughter from family members.

Another memory regarding him that stood out can be seen in the accompanying photograph taken at Christmas time. Since this was when he always received his year's supply of overalls and flannel shirts, he would sit focused with twinkling eyes on all the activity, patiently waiting until it was his turn to unwrap gifts. Then, carefully removing each bow, he would place it on his head, behind his ears, or somewhere on his person, all the while saying little, but exuding joy through twinkling eyes and wearing a smile that totally covered his face.

Additionally, a story that would be frequently resurrected was regarding a "run-in" that his friend Amos, a visitor and city slicker, had with a strong-willed goose. When contrasting my grandfather and Amos, the best example would be like night and day; especially regarding communication. Although my Grandpa Bill was labeled as a man of few words, Amos literally clattered every waking hour and wore the well-deserved label as being, "deaf in one ear and unable to hear out of the other."

Consequently, one morning when Grandpa Bill noted Amos preparing to enter the chicken yard where the old goose lived, he spoke up quickly saying, "Amos, I wouldn't go in there because that old goose is mean." Without thought, Amos quickly retorted, "Oh, Willy, Willy, Willy, that old goose won't hurt me."

Then not heeding the warning, the next scene was that of the old goose flapping his wings as a hunk of Amos' butt cheek was caught in his beak. Round and round the chicken lot they went to the tune from his friend's lips of, "Willy, Willy," circumstances that prompted Grandpa Bill's usual response. Having a keen sense of humor, hatless Grandpa Bill was bent over rubbing his head unable to respond due to being in a fit of raucous laughter.

My Earthly Dad

Although you have read the writer's tender words in earlier letters regarding the values her earthly father taught his three little daughters he so deeply cherished, the following accounts will be of those he found humor in as a man of the cloth; that of being a minister for many years. From his daughters' vantagepoint, the contrast between dad at home and Rev. Payton



Smyer in action was very great indeed. He would transition from a crazy funny creative dad into the shepherd of his flock every Sunday.

However, witnessing daily his wonderful sense of humor and how tickled he could become over actions of both humans and animals, only his family members were able to recognize the struggle in maintaining his composure that would ensue when he had spotted a unique occurrence from his vantage point of peering out into the congregation.

One example of this occurred during a Christmas Program in a little country church where he was pastoring. Since it was common for church members to perform the program using the talents of various age groups within the congregation, in order to form a backstage, white bed sheets were hung as curtains. Unfortunately, being too short to reach the floor, it was quite a noisy process when, not only could the audience view various sizes of feet beneath the make-shift arrangement of those nervously waiting their turn, but also hear the accompanying noise due to the wooden floor planks beneath. In spite of all the adjustments, somehow the nervous program director would pull off a miracle every Christmas that could only be classified as a winner.

However, one performer at a Christmas Program that required from our minister father all the composure he could muster in order to not break down into laughter was regarding a young man that performed a trumpet solo.

Since my father was responsible for keeping the program moving appropriately, he was positioned to the right of the pulpit, facing the congregation.

As the evening progressed, in spite of the distraction behind the make-shift curtains, the program seemed to be moving right along without a hitch; that is until it was time for the trumpet player to perform. As the notes began to flow from this wonderful instrument, the problem that had to be faced was to determine exactly what Christmas Carol he was trying to play. Given the fact that it was usually possible to decipher the chosen selection from just a few notes, everyone thought all would be well. In other words, at some point, just like in the game, "Name That Tune", the title would come to light.

Unfortunately, this was not even a possibility due to the fact that every note being played could only be labeled as "sour". The writer's city slicker husband

However, one Sunday evening near the end of his sermon, he found himself “between a rock and a hard place” due to an unavoidable situation that involved his oldest girl.

You see, by the time Sunday night service rolled around, it was extremely difficult for his three little girls to hold their sleepy eyes open; circumstances brought on by his busy workload every Sunday. Not only had he delivered a sermon for his own congregation, but usually took part in providing messages for other churches without ministers, or would take the family to singing conventions that lasted until late afternoon. Then, after milking his cows, the whole family would be present for the evening service at Antioch.

Consequently, on one particular evening, noting that his three daughters were stretched out on the hard-wooden pews fast asleep, he theorized there could only be smooth sailing ahead as he neared the ending of his sermon. Unfortunately, this turned out to not be the case due to the fact that, on this particular evening, the oldest daughter did not heed the warning that “nature” was calling and instead, just kept sleeping.

As a result, our dad suddenly glimpsed down from the pulpit noting a little stream of water running from where my sister lay fast asleep, weaving its way across the old plank boards of the center aisle, headed toward the back door of the church. Not waking, the little stream just kept flowing on and on.

Suddenly, realizing that his congregational members were following the shiny liquid rather than his words, his sermon had just been given a new ending. Yes, indeed! Our dad had just been caught “between a rock and a hard place.”

Oh, joy! So many wonderful memories! So much laughter because of accepting ones on imperfections.

Opal, the last story in this letter will not be about memories of the past, but of creating new ones; all brought about by a wonderful surprise the writer and her husband spotted on their daily walk. Isn't it wonderful to think about all the families that are creating memories that will be handed down from generation to generation? Our precious Lord always provides his children with the ability to love and a mind to create if we simply allow him to lead the way.

The Fairy Garden

One glorious sunny morning after climbing a steep incline and turning the corner on what was to offer a more level walking service, the writer and her husband's eyes were drawn to the foot of a large oak tree just outside the fence of a neighbor's yard.

There at its base was a magical surprise; that being a fascinating fairy garden that looked so inviting that it drew our footsteps down the path straight to the charming front door.

The various sized steps had been carefully cut, with the top being a natural sand color while the edges framed each one with the beautiful textures and shades of the bark that created mystery to an adventure that was about to be experienced.





Then quickly scanning the landscape all around our new discovery, it could only be described as a feast for the eyes. Not only was the door itself a marvelous focal point, but the interesting setting that framed both sides of it were just as appealing. Obviously, its inhabitants enjoyed life to the fullest.

As we stood soaking in all the different aspects of this wonderful fairy garden, it was obvious who ever lived here, not only enjoyed life, but invited guest to feel the same way.

There was much mystery to this secret hide-away for everyone to enjoy, including total strangers that stood on the outside looking in.

{Realizing your eyes would not be able to enjoy the detail of the setting, up close photographs were snapped accompanied by complete descriptions.}

The Front Door



Opal, the front door was a sight to behold that had mysterious, beautifully designed keyholes challenging each visitor to find the magic one for opening the door. Actually, there were 5 decorative keyholes that looked equally appealing to the eye.

The choices of keys were hanging on a hook to the left and looked much the same; a situation that made the feat even more demanding.

There was a charming knocker

on the right side at the top of the door that tempted the visitor to simply skip all the nonsense of finding the right key. However, if the age-old tale about fairies enjoying the elements of surprise and trickery is true, I would imagine a simple knock would either be ignored or lead to some other form of mischief. Do you agree? There was also a wand made from a stick that was leaning against the door knob that added even more intrigue. One thing for sure, we were curious to see what beautiful treasure could be found behind that mysterious door. How about you?

We even peaked through the two windows on either side of the tree to get a glimpse of what might be inside. Since a beautiful little potted plant had been placed on the window sill, it was obvious that someone called this place home.

Look at the beautiful bouquet of flowers beside the tree trunk below. Oops, we just missed the occupant! To the right of this was also a watering pot and pitch fork for the gardener inside.





On the right side of the mysterious door was a welcoming area for visitors to sit a spell by the warmth of a fire. Obviously, on a cool spring evening, whoever resided here enjoyed company because of the two chairs that rested beside the firepit surrounded by stones.

However, having been taught that one did not barge in without an invitation, the rules of proper etiquette were to be followed. Until that time, it was only right to drop a coin into the wishing well bird bath as a thank you for allowing two sets of eyes to soak in the beauty and mystery of this fascinating fairy garden.

Opal, we were so curious about our adventure that we researched the subject and learned that fairy gardens have been enjoyed by people in the United States since 1893 because the process of building one provides the opportunity for both children and the

young at heart to create memories that will last a lifetime and beyond.

Our thanks go out to Darin and Kristi Bohannon for not only their glorious creativity but for their generosity in sharing with others.

As our closing prayer today, enjoy the following poem written by Helen Lowrie Marshall.

TRUE MEASURE

How long we live is not for us to say;
We may have years ahead---or but a day
The length of life is not of our control,
But length is not the measure of the soul---
Not length, but width and depth define the span
By which the world takes measure of a man.
It matters not how long before we sleep,
But only how wide is our life---how deep.



Love,
Colene