

Terry Gerber Memorial Service
December 27, 2015

Remembrance of Terry
By Joan Kreider

When Terry and Dan arrived in Minneapolis in the early 80s, they eagerly plunged into the Faith Mennonite church community. They moved into an apartment in the neighborhood, and immediately became regulars at Friday night potluck.

Terry was a quiet, kind and enduring presence within our church community. Her life was remarkable in so many ways. She embodied faithfulness, hope, humility, nurturing, patience, and forgiveness. As I thought about what I wanted to say today, I realized that the most important thing was to share some of the important things Terry taught me about how to live.

She showed **faithfulness**. Commonly in times of loss we hear, “You are in my prayers.” Lots of us say this; Terry actually did it. She kept her list of prayer concerns and prayed faithfully. At one point, our deacons organized the church into prayer partners; lucky the person who received Terry’s persistent prayers. She eagerly volunteered at the Ten Thousand Villages store—first in providing child care so others could volunteer at the shop; when she could no longer do that, she became the one to call and schedule volunteers.

And she consistently demonstrated that often-undervalued virtue of just showing up: Terry and her family were always there for church, for Sunday School, for midweek youth “venture club”. Even as she moved to assisted living, when getting to church meant rising early (not her favorite thing), a long Metro Mobility ride, potentially a lengthy stop in the bathroom on the way—there she was, sitting in her wheelchair at the end of the last pew, with a ready smile for everyone at the end of the service. She modeled a **hopeful and optimistic spirit**. When others of us may have railed at the impossibility of living life with her physical limitations, she focused on purposeful goals: I will walk again. Her style was not to complain about what her body could not do. After each setback she always returned to that goal: I will walk again. She yearned to restart physical therapy and return to the Courage Center, where she could hope for progress towards mobility.

And that optimism was of course always evident in her ready joking. Every time I saw her, she shared a new groan-inducing terrible pun or joke. I confess that is one thing I didn’t learn as well as I could have—I actually cannot recall a single joke she told me.

She embodied **humility**. She willingly asked for help. My daughter Madeline, who grew up in church with Terry’s daughter Ruth, remembers that Terry would often ask her to help with small things: “Would you pick up my cane?” “Can you adjust my sweater?” She knew what she needed, and was not embarrassed or afraid to direct those around her to help meet those needs. In that way, all of us, including the children, felt not only useful, but a little bit transformed and special because we could be of service. She helped all of us to grow in compassion and empathy by inviting us into her life in these small acts of service.

She was a **nurturing mother**. As a former teacher, she devoted all of her experience, education and resources to the care and nurture of new baby Ruth in 1987. The result of this devotion and attentiveness was evident in Ruth--an alert, precocious child with an inquiring mind. And as Ruth grew and developed into a young woman, Terry’s limitations may also have given the gift of resourcefulness to her daughter; since she could not always do things for Ruth, Ruth learned capability in ways many children do not.

She demonstrated the virtue of slowing down, **patience**, and waiting. Her speech slowed over the years. She waited—for rides, for an attendant to answer her call. Phone conversations with Terry proceeded at a leisurely pace. Those conversations interrupted normal flow of my life. They created space, forced me to set aside time. They were invitations from Terry to experience life in a different way: to slow down, to give up my agenda, to just be there and pay attention.

On the other hand, sometimes I did not have the patience for those interruptions and so I too often failed to hold up my end of the friendship. In response, she taught me what **forgiveness** looks like. If I did not return phone calls, if I visited her too rarely—she never chastised or expressed disappointment but held me in what felt like a tiny space of God’s grace. Whenever I did show up, whenever I did take the time to talk on the phone, she was ready and waiting with open arms. The slate had been wiped clean, and only the present mattered.

Lest I paint too saintly a picture. She could be a fiercely competitive, even ruthless, game player. I felt the brunt of it, for example, when she was teaching me the game of Upwords, which she played very well. She would gleefully rack up huge scoring play after huge scoring play, unwilling to dumb down her play to sooth my wounded pride.

The last time I saw Terry was when we visited her to sing Christmas carols in her hospital room at HCMC. She had been having increasing difficulty with speaking over the preceding weeks. On that day, she repeatedly tried to express thoughts but we were unable to understand her. As we began to sing, we noticed that her mouth followed along, forming all the words of each song. She knew them all by heart—including her favorite, Oh Holy Night. As we left, she gave me a final gift: I leaned over her, and acknowledged that we noticed that she had sung with along with us. I said, “Music is a language that transcends words.” And she answered with a perfectly enunciated single word: “True”.

True. True to herself and to us and to her Creator. Thank you Terry, for teaching me ways to live a good life. I imagine you now, true to a newly restored self—expertly hitting that high E, running and jumping in joy at your strong legs, and of course cracking jokes. Freed at last.

An Advent Life
By Joetta Schlabach

Psalm 139

*Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts.
See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting*

Romans 8:18-25, 38-39

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing, for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. It’s hard to improve on the beautiful list that the Apostle Paul elaborated – neither life, nor death, nor rulers, things present, things to come. . .nor *anything else* in creation. But were Terry, who loved this passage, to have paraphrased it in her words, she could have easily added a few more specifics: neither paralysis, nor wheel chairs, nor a neurogenic bladder, nor hospital rooms, nor infection, nor vivid troubling dreams, nor seizures, nor the sometimes interminable wait after pressing the call button, are able to separate me from the love of God.

Any one of those things, for a few weeks or even a year, could shake the faith, or at least the good humor, of a number of us. But Terry pressed on for over 35 years, never losing her humor and quick

smile, grounded in a faith of expectancy and a deep confidence of being loved by God. She certainly had her times of discouragement and frustration. Many of us received phone calls when she was feeling distressed. But we also received just as many calls to report a new record in the number of steps she had taken or the strength she was building by lifting hand weights. About a month before she died, a small group from our church visited with Terry and spent time reciting and discussing the twenty-third Psalm. She had just returned to Augustana following a hospitalization but she was especially cheerful that day. In the course of our discussion, she commented on how she would always begin her prayers, which she recorded in a journal, with words of thanksgiving. Nothing can separate us from the love of God.

The death of someone we love always feels untimely, too soon. All the more so when it comes in the midst of a season like Christmas, that is wrapped in memories and filled with emotions. But for Terry's physical life to conclude during the season of Advent carries a certain grace and poignancy. For Advent, in the Christian year, is a season of waiting. It is not the penitential waiting of Lent when we ponder the passion of Christ, but the expectant waiting of one who is pregnant, of one longing for liberation and new life. For Christians, Advent invites us to recall the first coming of Jesus as a baby into a troubled world and also to anticipate his return, what the Apostle Paul referred to as: the revealing of the children of God... all of creation [being] set free from its bondage to decay." The Old Testament prophets described this time in terms of lasting justice and peace and the closing book of Christian scripture, Revelation, envisions a new heaven and a new earth, whether the leaves of trees and water in the rivers are filled with healing not just for a few but for all the nations. Were not all of these the things for which Terry longed and hoped for? Was her life not an Advent life?

But it was not just in the waiting and the expectancy that we witnessed Advent in Terry's life. It was also in her very limitation and vulnerability. For in Advent we celebrate the incarnation, the mystery of God taking on flesh and entering our human experience. God as a human baby: what could be more limiting, more vulnerable? God needing the care of a young, inexperienced mother and the protection of a father that people likely talked about behind his back. Terry knew limitation; she knew vulnerability. And the primary way that the church ritualizes and remembers the weakness (and the strength) of God—in communion—was important to her even when she could no longer be present in our communal breaking of bread. Deacons and others joined me in regularly taking communion to Terry.

While Terry lived an Advent life, her limitations called from all of us one of the primary attributes of God that is held up in Old Testament scripture: *hesed* – the faithful, loving-kindness of God. While the burden of faithfulness fell most heavily upon Dan, this was a calling in which we all shared. None of us will feel that we always responded adequately or visited as often as we intended. In this we, like Terry, need to recognize *our* limitations and vulnerability—and grant one another the grace that God grants to us. Often times when Mennonites and Catholics share experiences, we find that one of the things we hold in common is the ability to feel guilty. But somehow Terry survived a Catholic upbringing and a Mennonite life of faith that seemed fairly guilt-free. Certainly she lamented that she could not be an equal partner and helpmate for Dan. Some days she would call to confess her loss of patience and a conflictive exchange with an aid, but having made her confession she could let it go. With the Psalmist she could say "Search me, O God, and know my heart" and then she would move on to "lead me in the way everlasting." Let us follow her lead!

Terry's tenacity in the face of vulnerability continued to the end. As her health declined in the final two weeks of her life, and she lost the ability to communicate clearly, the best pastoral care that I and others in our congregation could offer was through song. Two weeks ago this evening, a group of us gathered around her hospital bed at HCMC and Dan and Ruth joined us in singing Advent songs and Christmas carols. While her mouth moved uncontrollably when she tried to speak, it relaxed and she was able to mouth the words of each song that we sang. The same was true just a day before her stroke as she again mouthed the words as I sang "Hear, O Lord," and "O come, O come, Emmanuel."

Advent has passed; we are in the season of Christmas, of Emmanuel, God with us. Terry has passed, but only in body. Her memory, her spirit, her faith, are with us; we now claim her as part of the great cloud of witnesses. In the spirit of Terry's gratitude, let us give thanks for having shared in her life. And with Terry, let us affirm that "nothing can separate us from the love of God."