

GOD, ALS, AND PRAYER

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INTRODUCTION

Writing about my life is certainly not something I ever planned to do. I've led a rather uneventful life; however, I suppose that having a terminal disease has made it a little more interesting.

Since March 2000 I've had nudges to write about how my illness has brought me closer to God; how He has used it to change me; and how He has given me the strength and peace to live with the disease as it progresses. As I grow weaker physically, I continue to grow stronger spiritually. That is much better than my previous condition of being strong physically and weak spiritually. And as a Christian I know that my life here on earth is just temporary and that death is just the beginning for eternal life in Heaven. I also know that it must be glorious because of what God has already shown me here on earth.

In the past few years I have become aware of a frequency of ordinary events occurring at the most amazing time. Like thinking about someone you haven't heard from for quite awhile, then suddenly getting a phone call from him or her. Some people call it luck, coincidence, blessings, miracles, or God-incidences, my favorite. I've thought a lot about writing about mine. But, I didn't want people to think I was crazy or a religious fanatic so I've only told a few people about them. However, I think that being disabled makes it a little easier for me to share my story with others. I'm learning to not worry so much about what people think of me. I'm now sure that I am supposed to share what I've experienced.

My pastor, Ray Dowdy, says that he's never known anyone to receive as many "miracles" as I do. I must admit that my illness has forced me to slow down so I tend to notice things others might miss in their busy lives. But I also believe that something within me (the Holy Spirit) helps me recognize a special message from God.

In January 2002 many incidents kept reminding me to start writing. An episode of my favorite program "Touched by an Angel" was about a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist. She was having headaches and episodes of slurred speech but refused to go in for tests for a brain tumor. She had just completed writing her memoirs but didn't include anything about meeting an angel years before. She was afraid of what people would think. The angel

had returned to tell her she needed to write the truth about God so everyone would know about Him, especially her family. And, she needed to do it now in case she died from a brain tumor.

Well, it sure sounded like a message to me. But, I figured that I'm not a Pulitzer Prize winning writer with an interesting life that people would want to read about. The next morning, it occurred to me that God often uses ordinary people. I thought, "Perhaps, I don't have to be a professional writer. Perhaps my writing is simple and easy for people to understand." But I was still concerned about what people would think.

Then while on the internet, a reference to a church in Palo Alto made me think about Karen, a young woman I worked with in 1976, who attended that church. We frequently did things together outside of work and she often mentioned God. If I was with her and she met a friend, she'd introduce us and later tell me, "God wanted you two to meet". Well, I thought she was a religious fanatic and never did accept the invitation to go to church with her.

As I think more about that friendship so many years ago, I realize now she was very spiritual. And, at that time I wasn't. But I still liked her as a person. I just didn't share the Christian part of her life. I realize you may read my essay and think, "Lois must be crazy or a religious fanatic". However, I think that if you know me you will still like me as a person. And, just as I now understand what Karen was feeling then, I hope someday you will think of me and understand what I am feeling, if you don't understand it already.

When facing death, I've heard that people are often asked what they would change about their life if they could live it over. We all joke about how we would never say "I wish I spent more time at work". That is so true for me. And, now I know I would answer "I wish I had a personal relationship with God my entire life." I realize what a difference God has made in my life the last few years. If I'd relied on Him sooner, I would have been a better person and that would have improved my relationship with family, friends, co-workers, and everyone else.

I hope my story will encourage you to start a personal relationship with God if you don't have one already. If you already have one, perhaps you know someone you'd like to share my story with.

I know God has different plans for all of us. I feel I am supposed to share with you how God can help us in our lives everyday, not just when we are in a desperate situation as I am. I feel that because I have a terminal disease God has shown me glimpses of His power to give me hope and encourage me to keep fighting and not give in to despair. I do not know why I am so blessed but I do know God is awesome.

I started this essay in January 2002 during a very spiritual period, however I did not share it with anyone. In October 2002, a few friends at my church urged me to follow the nudges to write and asked me to send them my essay, which I did. (Thank you, angels.) Once I let them read it; their encouragement made it easier for me to share my essay with others. I am ready to share my experience now. And, I have even added just a few of my “God-incidents”.

GOD, ALS, AND PRAYER

When I was a year old and my brother, Steve, was 4 years old my mother started taking us to the Knights Landing Community Methodist Church. Someone Mom barely knew told her about the Sunday school program there and invited her to church. (I will be eternally grateful to Fern Hunter, the woman my mom thinks invited her.)

Now I truly appreciate what Mom did for us, too. You see, my parents are Buddhist. Their church was in Sacramento and since Dad was a tomato farmer and often worked on Sundays, they didn't attend their church regularly. Mom felt any church was better than no church and she made sure Steve and I attended Sunday school regularly. We lived several miles outside of town so Mom drove us to church and often stayed for the worship service, although she never did convert. I still treasure a little children's book of prayer that I received with "6 months of perfect attendance" written on the inside cover.

The summer before I was in 6th grade, we moved to Woodland and I started going to the Methodist church there. I remember someone would drive me to church for worship service or Sunday school and I usually walked home across town. I'm not sure now why I was so dedicated...I guess it had become a Sunday routine for me. I also attended MYF (Methodist Youth Fellowship) until I was a senior in high school.

Although I memorized many Bible passages in Sunday school, the only one I never forgot is John 3:16. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life". I can still remember the room and reciting it.

As a college student, I attended church once when my dormitory Resident Assistant invited me to her church. As a young adult I didn't attend church. Most of my weekends involved activities like tennis, skiing, backpacking, camping, or hanging out with friends. I enjoyed my time in the mountains the most. The spectacular views and grandness of the trees, granite, and mountains helped me put my worries and life in perspective. I always felt spiritually renewed in the mountains. And, it was there that I felt there must be a Creator and I said "thank you".

I started going to Sunday worship services again several years ago just to take my children, Travis and Taralyn, to Sunday school so they could learn about Jesus. Although I had learned about God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit as a child, I still had doubts about their existence as an adult. I went to church “just in case there really was a God”. I didn’t understand the relationship between God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. I certainly don’t remember anyone telling me I had to accept Jesus as my Savior and ask for forgiveness. John 3:16 was just a verse I had memorized as a child. I guess one could say the foundation had been laid, but that’s about it. I must have slept through the lessons and sermons because I certainly didn’t “get it” and I didn’t feel anything in my heart.

I had a very traditional Japanese upbringing since my grandmother, who was born and raised in Japan, lived with my family. And, although my dad was born in the U.S., he was also raised in Japan. As a child I learned to hold in my emotions since our family was not openly affectionate or emotional, which was the typical Japanese way. I also learned to depend on my inner strength to get me through any difficult situations I encountered.

I’ve had a very good life and I attributed most of it to my own inner strength, actions, and a lot of good luck. I remember seeing a movie called “The Other Side of the Mountain”, a true story about a young skier named Jill Kinmont. Her friend gets polio and says she thought that she was lucky and that someday her luck would run out. I had wondered the same thing about myself at times.

Well, in January 1999, I was diagnosed with ALS/Lou Gehrig’s disease. It’s an incurable, progressive, neuromuscular disease that results in death. In the advanced stages the person is completely paralyzed but the mind is usually untouched. It can start in the arms, legs, or with one’s speech, which is where mine started.

I thought my inner strength would be enough to handle having ALS, especially since I knew I’d have the support of family and friends. I planned to continue working at Hewlett-Packard (HP), adapt to the physical changes, and become an inspiration to others. But, as I thought more about it, I realized I wasn’t strong enough to handle it, even with the support of family and friends. I silently cried out “God, if you’re real, please help me.” And, He did. He helped me put Him at the top of my priority list and my job way down at the bottom. He showed me that I needed to spend more time with

Tara and Travis (aged 8 and 11, at the time) and my husband, Paul. And, He surrounded me with loving and supporting family, friends, Christians, healthcare professionals, ALS/MDA organizations, and e-mail (I couldn't talk much anymore, so e-mail allowed me to stay in touch with friends and boy could I type up a storm).

One of the first things God did was to comfort me. I heard songs about "Angels" whenever I listened to the radio in the van. When I was feeling depressed or started thinking about my future with ALS, an angel song came on. The first song I heard was "I'm Your Angel" by R. Kelly & Celine Dion, then "Angel" (in the arms of an angel) by Sarah McLachlan, then "When You Believe" (about miracles from an animated movie about Moses called "Prince of Egypt") by Whitney Houston and Mariah Carey. I told Paul and the kids about the songs and they started noticing it also. The song often came on when I was only in the van long enough to hear one song. Often, when I turned the ignition on, the song would be playing on the radio. I began to sense that God was telling me He had surrounded me with angels to help me and I cried, which was something I was not used to doing.

Once, Paul had taken the radio out of the van to work on it and I drove to Woodland without being able to hear an angel song for an hour. I was meeting my high school friends for a luncheon and stopped off at the local grocery store to pick up a head of lettuce, my contribution for lunch. The song "Angel" started playing on the overhead speakers.

Another time we were almost in Woodland when Paul realized the radio wasn't on. He jokingly said, "We should turn the radio on so Mom can hear her angel song". He turned it on and yes, "I'm Your Angel" was playing.

Some time after my diagnosis my sister-in-law Glenda called to say that her church, Capital Christian Center, was having Miracle Night and Joshua, her son, wanted me to know about it since their family was going. I figured since he was going I should go. Paul, Travis, Taralyn, and I arrived at the church early and as Paul pulled into the parking space "When You Believe", started playing. It was as if God was telling me that now that I believed in angels, I was ready to move on to believing in miracles. Was it coincidence or God-incidence?

When I left HP to go on Medical Leave in February 1999, a co-worker gave me a daily devotional called Streams in the Desert. She said the last time

she attended church was as a child, which I figure was over 50 years ago. She said she went to a Christian bookstore, told the sales person about me, and said she wanted to get me a special gift. The sales person recommended that book. God knew I needed that book. I didn't know what a devotional was and I didn't pray or read the Bible. I know that it really helped me keep my spirits up the first year I read it. The messages touched my heart and gave me the strength to face each day knowing that God loved me and was taking care of me. It continues to help me now. I've also given over 30 copies to friends.

I know God didn't want me to have ALS, but I know He is watching over me. I also feel He knew my future and prepared me for it. As I look back at the various jobs I've had, I learned something at all of them that have helped me cope with ALS. The 4 years I worked with the severely mentally retarded helped me the most. I learned about physical disabilities, wheelchairs, adaptive equipment, and therapy. I also consulted with the various therapists who now assist me. Ironically I had considered a college degree in occupational or physical therapy but ended up with a therapeutic recreation degree although I was an introvert. I know, hard to believe for those of you who know me now.

Several people have asked me if I was angry when I learned that I had ALS. I have to admit that I was not. When I graduated from college I volunteered at Stanford Children's Hospital in their oncology (cancer) and cystic fibrosis departments for awhile. I learned about living and dying from the kids there. They faced their illnesses with such courage and humor. I often wondered, "Why do these innocent kids have to die?" When I was diagnosed with ALS I was 47 years old, had a wonderful husband, 2 precious children, and a good life so I did not ask "Why me?" However, I have asked God "Why me?" when I think of the many special ways He has touched my life.

Having ALS has helped me realize what really is important and what isn't. I have had to slow down because of my physical weakness. I'm not involved in the "busyness" I was before. ALS made me "let go and let God". All of this has given me more time to focus on God and to notice His presence. I would never have done that if I hadn't had ALS. I have no doubt God knew that I would be able to rely on the Christian foundation that had been laid when I was a child.

In March 2000 I reluctantly agreed to attend the Walk to Emmaus, a Christian retreat. I'm sure that if I didn't have ALS I would not have gone. Pastor Ray and a friend, Chris, first mentioned my going but I had many excuses for not going. Months later another friend, Christine, was a little more persistent about asking me so I finally agreed to go without knowing anything about it. Since they're held 2 or 3 times a year I had a feeling it would keep coming up until I went. I am so thankful now to all 3 of them. My going resulted in developing a personal relationship with Jesus and more spiritual growth. I was "born again" at my Walk. I call Chris and Christine my "Angel Moms".

The last morning of the Walk I had a supernatural experience that I haven't shared with many people. I had a terrible headache, my eyes hurt from wearing my contact lenses too long, and I had hunger pains because I was having difficulty eating food and wasn't drinking enough Ensure. It was still dark in the Sunday school classroom so I didn't want to wake the other women who were sleeping. I knew it would take me awhile to find my Advil, contact lens case, glasses, and can of Ensure, with a flashlight. I was not as steady on my feet either, and wasn't sure I could avoid tripping on the women sleeping on the floor as I made my way to the door. I decided to wait and rolled over to my right side. Then I felt a strong large hand firmly on my left shoulder. I was filled with peace and the touch seemed to tell me I needed to take care of myself. I knew I should take Advil, take out my contacts, and drink an Ensure. When I no longer felt the hand, I listened for footsteps and the rustle of a sleeping bag. But as I expected, I didn't hear anything. It felt like a man's hand and there were only women in the room. I gathered my things and went to the bathroom to take care of myself.

I didn't give it another thought until we stopped at a restaurant for dinner on our way home that night. I mentioned it to Pastor Ray and he seemed very interested. It was then that I realized myself how amazing it was. I have wondered why I was not shocked or excited when I felt that hand on my shoulder. I've decided that I was in a different state of mind from usual which allowed the experience and also kept me from reacting emotionally.

On September 9, 2001, Pastor Ray started a class to discuss the book "The Will of God", by Leslie Weatherhead. He had a sermon series based on it for a few Sundays also. (Note that it was the Sunday before 9/11.) Weatherhead talks about 3 kinds of will. God's intentional will (God's ideal plan for men), God's circumstantial will (God's plan within certain

circumstances), and God's ultimate will (God's final realization of his purposes). In the chapter about circumstantial will, the following statement caught my attention immediately.

Given a spiritual awakening so glorious that the personality lives in close co-operation with God, the healthy body is more in line with his will. But so many healthy people are spiritually asleep and are not co-operating with him at all, and so many sick people have, through the sickness, become spiritually awakened during their illness that out of the circumstances of evil they have created and set free spiritual energies far more valuable than the spiritual apathy of the healthy person.

It explains what happened to me. I have been spiritually awakened and it is pretty amazing. Sure, I still have my ups and downs, but I know God is always with me and that is very comforting. There's a peace that comes with that assurance. I certainly wish I had been spiritually awakened when I was healthy though, so I hope you learn from my situation. But, I have learned from others that it seems to happen often when people are faced with a crisis in their lives. I guess when things are going well, we don't think we have a need for God. What a mistake that is. I wish that when I was healthy I knew then what I know now.

Something I've learned to do as a result of ALS is to pray regularly for others and myself. I prayed in church during Sunday worship services before but I was always under the impression that praying for oneself was selfish. And, I thought God was busy helping others with bigger problems than mine, so I shouldn't bother him with my petty problems. I thought my having ALS was big enough to bother Him with so I did finally pray for myself. I also thought there was a certain way to pray, but now I realize it's just talking to God. And, He has helped me buy a book and directed me to a particular store so I guess He doesn't mind my unimportant questions. However, when I was healthy I did what I wanted and never bothered to ask God what He wanted me to do. In fact, I actually preferred it that way. I've come to realize life is easier when I follow God's direction. Things just seem to work out better. I even receive a lot of things I need for free or on discount.

One of the most amazing days I have had was a few days after my Walk. I dropped Travis and Tara off at school and happened to see an acquaintance.

We hadn't really talked to each other before, but he talked about a concern he had. Later, when I got into my van I silently asked "God, should I buy him Streams in the Desert?" I started the van and the radio DJ was talking about a book. He was going on and on about how wonderful it was. Finally he said "If you don't have Streams in the Desert, go to the store and buy it!" Well, that was a pretty clear answer to me. But, as I was driving I asked, "Should I go to Auburn or Roseville?" The larger store in Roseville was 20 miles away and the Auburn store was only 5 miles away but very small. I decided to go to Auburn. But when I got to the freeway on ramp, it was closed because a Cal Trans crew was working on it. I turned around and decided to take a back road to the next freeway on ramp. But, I couldn't get to that road because the County road crew was working on it. Now, there were other ways to get to Auburn, but having been blocked twice I felt I was supposed to go to Roseville.

While driving there I asked, "How many books should I buy?" I sensed I should leave a display copy but buy the rest. There were 3 copies so I bought 2. I had one gift wrapped for a man and sensed the other should be wrapped for a woman. On my way home I gave the man his copy. When I got home I checked my e-mail. I had a message from a woman I had worked with. She wrote that she had just come home from having emergency cancer surgery. She had gone to the doctor, learned she had cancer, and was scheduled immediately for surgery. I knew the extra copy of Streams in the Desert was for her. The woman who gave me my copy was a friend of hers. A few months later I decided to go to the store in Auburn. A second-hand-children's clothing store was where the Christian store had been and the woman in the store told me the bookstore had closed in March. Was it coincidence or God-incidence?

It's mind boggling when I think of the plans He has for each of us, how He connects people and events in our lives, and the timing of everything. It is beyond my understanding, but I know He hears my prayers, because too often now they're answered. And, if I don't think they were, I'm better about waiting. I used to want to be more patient and I ended up with a husband, 2 kids, and now ALS. I also wanted to be a better listener and ended up not being able to talk. Be careful what you think about and pray for. You may not get what you expect. I'm still working on patience and listening, even though you'd think I'd be good at it by now since I'm pretty dependent on others for everything. However, I know I'm better than I was a year ago.

Sometimes I think that if God already has a plan, what good are my prayers, especially the ones for other people. I subscribed to the magazine “Angels on Earth” and the Nov/Dec 2001 issue had a letter from Mary Canniff of Tracy, California.

She wrote:

Once I didn’t believe that prayer could really change anything. Then I read “From Your Lips” in the Nov/Dec 1999 issue. It was about a hospitalized man who felt cold in his sleep and dreamed that to warm him angels were making a quilt out of the many prayers his family, neighbors and friends had said for him. By the time the angels were done, he was completely covered, warm and comfortable.

That story changed how I think about prayer. Now, instead of thinking they are not enough, I offer my “prayer scraps” for angels to collect and sew into quilts of God’s love.

Well, her letter made me look at my prayers differently, too. Now I think of people I’m praying for covered by a prayer quilt or comforter and when I “lift a person up in prayer” I think of the person lifted closer to God by each person praying for them. And I enjoy praying because it makes me focus on God and others as well as spend time with Him. Oh, I thought it interesting that Mary’s letter appeared a year after the article she mentions. Usually letters appear a few issues later. And, this was the first issue I received. I only subscribed to it because Travis needed one more magazine subscription to get a certain prize. Was it coincidence or God-incidence?

In addition to feeling warm and fuzzy knowing so many people are praying for me, I also believe in the power of prayer. Life expectancy for those of us with ALS is 2-6 years on average. And, 50% die within 3 years of the diagnosis. Bulbar onset ALS (where it starts in the mouth area first, like mine) is considered the worst because swallowing and breathing can be affected in the earlier stages of the disease, so life expectancy is shorter.

Well, my slurred speech started in March 1998. I know others with bulbar onset ALS who have lost their voices completely. My family still understands me most of the time (I think there’s some selective listening and “tuning out” involved.... remember I have 2 school-age kids and a husband).

I've joked that yelling at the kids is good exercise and that's why I still have a voice, but now I think God is waiting for me to use my voice to say loving things.

Well, if you've been praying for my "healing" you may be wondering if your prayers are helping. Let me say that in addition to covering me with a warm blanket of prayers to comfort me, your prayers are indeed being answered. I haven't lost complete use of any of my muscles and I know a lot of healing is going on within me. God is really changing me.

In September 2001 I attended a Holy Spirit Conference in Yuba City. The speakers and sessions were wonderful. I was particularly interested in going to a session called "Healing Prayer". I went in with Ruth, a woman I'd met at my Walk. There were already about a dozen people sitting around the tables, so I searched for a space that would be easy for me to get to since I was using a walker. I chose a seat at the corner of the table and Ruth sat next to me. Each place around the table had a Bible and as people started looking at them, the instructor informed us that there was a bookmark with a particular verse she wanted us to read out loud when the time came during her talk. Since I can't speak, anxiety hit me as I looked through my Bible for a bookmark. I couldn't find one so Ruth mentioned it to the instructor and she replied that there was one Bible without a bookmark. I was amazed. I didn't know the instructor, she didn't know I would be at that session, sitting at that spot, and she didn't know I couldn't speak. I knew I was in the right place and that God was expecting me. At the end of the session I did ask her why there was one Bible without a marker. She said that as she was putting them out, she knew she was supposed to leave one Bible without a marker. She did not seem at all surprised by it like I was. She didn't question it. She just obeyed. By the way, she is a pastor. Was it coincidence or God-incidence?

Well, the session was very insightful. Pastor Holly shared some stories of how "healing" can mean something other than what we are expecting. I shared with the group that after my diagnosis, my healing first started with my heart. I was healed of a childhood resentment that I just couldn't get rid of on my own. I also was healed of something from my childhood that I didn't even realize bothered me still. At the end of the session the group prayed over me. I was not miraculously healed of ALS, but I have no doubt that some kind of healing that I didn't notice did occur.

Pastor Holly read several stories out of the book “Stretch Out Your Hand” by Tilda Norberg and Robert D. Webber. It’s about healing prayer so I bought a copy at the conference. I was amazed when I later read the following story.

The temptation to impose our agenda for healing. It is enormously tempting to pray for healing while insisting on our agenda for the person prayed for. This does not mean that we should pray only in vague generalities. It does mean that we trust that God loves this person even more than we do and that God knows what is best better than we do. It is crucial to pray for specifics only after we have discerned what God wants to do for the person.

A healing team of which Tilda was a part learned this in a process that was both painful and deeply moving. Jeff, a twenty-one-year-old college student and a member of the track team, found out that he had amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), also called Lou Gehrig’s disease...When Jeff first heard that he had about 2 years to live, he was furiously angry. He railed. He swore. He yelled. He cried. He could not stand to see anyone who was healthy or happy. He was going to die and he was certain no one cared, not even his parents.

When our prayer team began to pray for Jeff, we prayed earnestly that he would be healed of ALS, that he would go back to school and run again. We prayed that he would not die. Sharing Jeff’s feeling that death at such a young age was unfair and awful, we prayed with our own agenda. We yearned somehow to magically control what was happening to him.

We all liked Jeff a lot. It was very painful to see that each time he came for prayer he had less and less control of his muscles. His disease was progressing fast. The healing team was bewildered and upset. Yet God was powerfully at work. God met Jeff in all of his fear, confusion, and despair and started to change things for him.

Through our prayers Jeff felt prompted to deal with his troubled relationship with his parents. As he began to face their very real rejection of him, he expressed his rage—and then let it flow away. After letting go of his anger, he was able to see them clearly as two broken people who had loved him the best way they could. Soon he forgave them and came to appreciate them for the first time in his life.

He also admitted that he had caused pain to a number of women friends...He started writing to the women, asking their forgiveness. Most of them forgave and supported him during his dying process. As these personal matters began to clear up in his life, Jeff began to feel better, despite the progressing of the disease.

Gradually the prayer group began to see that God was healing something within Jeff that we had never considered. It was hard for us to let go of our agenda for him, but the more we were able to surrender, the more Jeff seemed to benefit from our prayers.

As Jeff invited Jesus into his life more and more, his spiritual life deepened into radiance. He began to be so certain of God's love that he would say to people, "I know I'm dying, but I wouldn't exchange my life for anyone else's in the world. I know I'm dying, but I've been healed. I know I'm dying, but if I didn't have this illness, I would never have had this joy." And, indeed, it was obvious that Jeff was living in profound joy.

About a year before he died, Jeff began to be unafraid of dying; in fact he was almost eager for it, looking forward to death as an adventure. He and a friend made a video of his last months, in which he tried to relate the message that even death for a Christian is finally not a tragedy. For Jeff, death was his healing, setting him free from pain and bondage and ushering him into new life.

Jeff deeply touched all of us who knew him. We had not wanted his kind of healing in the beginning. We found it hard to give up our agenda and were terribly saddened by his death. But clearly Jeff had been healed, and it seemed that God had used our prayers.

Wow! I could certainly relate to Jeff's story. It was so similar to my own experience. My heart is certainly being healed. But, I think that there is some physical healing going on too. The disease is progressing slowly in my case and I have noticed some improvement eating, swallowing, and drinking which is not typical. God is changing me from the inside out. Thank you for your prayers. They are being answered.

I have one more fun story to share with you. There's a lot more to this God-incidence that I could share, but I will keep it simple here. After you read it, please think about the span of years involved and the timing of everything.

Our 15-year old yellow lab, Nani, died in August 2001 and our 7-year old cat, Milo, a few weeks later. Both were outdoor pets, so Tara started asking

for an indoor cat and Travis wanted an indoor dog. Since I was getting worse, Paul had to do more, and winter was approaching, we said “not now”. I continually prayed about it, though. They kept asking and in February, Cassie, a woman who was putting a ramp in our house, mentioned she was a foster parent for rescued animals. She told us about a sweet cat she had with long white hair. Not exactly my choice of hair, but we let Tara adopt Danny. Of course Travis kept asking about his dog so we asked Cassie to keep us in mind for a small dog suitable for indoors. We weren’t interested in training a puppy since we’d never had an indoor dog before (we live in the country surrounded by weeds and dirt) and we knew the house training would be a lot of work.

In July we were going on vacation for a week so I remembered Cassie had offered to watch Danny for us. So we contacted her and arranged to leave him with her on Saturday since we were leaving on Sunday. Friday night we decided to watch 1 of the DVDs Paul had bought several weeks before. I was happy when the kids chose “Old Yeller”. I had often suggested renting that movie when they were younger, but they always picked another movie. Paul and I hadn’t seen the movie since we were kids so we were surprised the older boy in the movie was named Travis. We had fun saying “Travis, we got lots of corn”, or “Oh no, Travis”, etc. Well, our Travis didn’t think it was funny, but he did keep asking us when he could get a dog.

The next day Paul and Tara took Danny to Cassie’s and when they returned they said she was looking for a home for a 4-month old yellow lab she had. A woman at her church had told her she wanted a yellow lab pup so when Cassie saw someone giving Nala away, she took her for the woman. But when she notified the woman, she learned that the woman had already purchased 2 puppies so she was stuck with Nala. Paul and I discussed it and decided we’d ask Travis if he were interested. Of course he was, so he let Cassie know we’d pick Nala and Danny up when we got home from vacation. It seemed perfect. She would be spayed while we were gone and somehow since her name Nala was so similar to Nani, it seemed like my prayers were answered. But while on vacation I wondered if we were ready for a puppy. I continued to pray about it. When we got home Paul took the kids to pick up their pets.

When Nala walked in the door, she was so cute but frisky. I wondered if we had made the right decision. Were we really ready for a puppy?

Then Paul walked in and said our new handicap license plate for the wheelchair van we bought in January finally came in the mail. When he took it out of the envelope we saw it was K9398. "K9" seemed to be the answer to my concerns. I sensed Nala was a blessing from God. Paul said that he had doubts about a puppy too, but "K9" also made him feel better. And remember 3/98 is when I first noticed slurred speech, the first ALS symptom I had. It's as if God was saying He knew in 3/98 that I would need this van and that Nala was indeed a gift from Him. She has been an unusually good puppy. And she and Danny are great company for me when I'm home alone. Although they are both pretty mellow, they are often entertaining and keep our entire family laughing at their antics. They are just what the doctor ordered. Was it all coincidence or God-incidence?

Since I'm home alone a lot, I've had plenty of time to focus on God by praying, reading the Bible, listening to Christian music, and watching Joyce Meyer's Life in the Word TV program (I just love her message and recently got to see her speak in San Jose). As a family, however, we still need to include God in our lives everyday, not just Sundays. It's not easy to do since we're not in the habit of doing that. But we are improving; we give thanks before we eat and we listen to a Christian radio station when we are going somewhere in the van, although portable CD players make it easier for the kids to listen to their own music. It may take awhile for us to change our old ways, but I know all the prayers for our family are helping. God has surrounded Paul, Travis, Taralyn, and me with many angels. Our church family at Newcastle United Methodist Church has been especially supportive. We continue to learn from them as Jesus shines through them in all they do.

I recently heard that when facing death people often think about what really mattered in their lives and what they will be remembered for. I realize now that what matters to me is love. As I've grown closer to God and felt the love He has for me, I want to share that love with others, especially my family. Because of my upbringing, it's not easy for me to express it in my actions and words, but I'm working on it. I hope that God's love will shine through me and people will remember how He blessed me.

While watching the movie "A Christmas Carol" last Christmas, Bob Cratchet said something that caught my attention for the first time, although I've seen the movie dozens of times. He says that Tiny Tim told him "he wasn't going to feel shy if people looked at him because he was a cripple as

it might be pleasant to them in church to remember upon Christmas day, who made lame beggars walk and blind men see.”

Perhaps when people see or think of me on any given day, they will also think of Jesus and God.

MAY GOD BLESS YOU AS HE HAS BLESSED ME