

CT Classic: Living by Vows

As his wife suffered with Alzheimer's, Robertson McQuilkin said, "If I took care of her for 40 years, I would never be out of her debt."

Robertson McQuilkin | posted 02/09/2004

After his wife was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, college and seminary president Robertson McQuilkin found himself torn between two commitments, two divine callings. At the request of the CT editors, he shares the story of his struggle:

It has been a decade since that day in Florida when Muriel, my wife, repeated to the couple vacationing with us the story she had told just five minutes earlier. *Funny*, I thought, *that's never happened before*. But it began to happen occasionally.

Three years later, when Muriel was hospitalized for tests on her heart, a young doctor called me aside. "You may need to think about the possibility of Alzheimer's," he said. I was incredulous. These young doctors are so presumptuous—and insensitive. Muriel was doing the same things she had always done, for the most part. True, we had stopped entertaining in our home—no small loss for the president of a thriving seminary and Bible college. She was a great cook and hostess, but she was having increasing difficulty planning menus. Family meals she could handle, but with guests we could not risk missing a salad and dessert, for example.

And, yes, she was having uncommon difficulty painting a portrait of me, which the college and seminary board—impressed by her earlier splendid portrait of my predecessor—had requested. But Alzheimer's? While I had barely heard of the disease, a dread began to lurk around the fringes of my consciousness.

When her memory deteriorated further, we went to Joe Tabor, a neurologist friend, who gave her the full battery of tests and, by elimination, confirmed that she had Alzheimer's. But because she had none of the typical physical deterioration, there was some question. We went to the Duke University Medical Center, believing we should get the best available second opinion. My heart sank as the doctor asked her to name the Gospels and she looked pleadingly at me for help. But she quickly bounced back and laughed at herself. She was a little nervous, perhaps, but nothing was going to get her down.

This time we accepted the verdict. And we determined from the outset not to chase around the country every new "miracle" treatment we might hear about. Little did I know the day was coming when we would be urged—on average, once a week—to pursue every variety of treatment: vitamins, exorcism, T chemicals, this guru, that healer. How could I even wife 1 look into them all, let alone pursue them? I was grateful to friends who made suggestions, because each was an expression of love. But for us, we would trust the Lord to work a miracle in Muriel if he so desired, or work a miracle in me if he did not.

One day the WMHK station manager, the program manager, and the producer of my wife's morning radio program, "Looking Up," asked for an appointment. I knew an occasional program she had produced was not used, but the response to her monologue of upbeat encouragement continued to be strong. Though the program was designed for women, businessmen often told me how they arranged their morning affairs so they could catch the program.

As the appointment began, the three executives seemed uneasy. After a few false starts, I caught on. They were reluctantly letting me know that an era was ending. Only months before they had talked of national syndication. I tried to help them out. "Are you meeting with me to tell us that Muriel cannot continue?" They seemed relieved that their painful message was out and none of them had to say it. So, I thought, her public ministry is over. No more conferences, TV, radio. I should have guessed the time had come.

She did not think so, however. She may have lost the radio program, but she insisted on accepting invitations to speak, even though invariably she would come home crushed and bewildered that her train of thought was lost and things did not go well. Gradually, reluctantly, she gave up public ministry.

Still, she could counsel the many young people who sought her out, she could drive and shop, or write her children. The letters did not always make sense, but then, the children would say, "Mom always was a bit spacy." She also volunteered to read textbooks for a blind graduate student. The plan was to put them on tape so that others could use them. I was puzzled that those responsible never used them, until it dawned on me that reading and writing were going the way of art and public speaking. She was disappointed with each failure and frustration, but only momentarily. She would bounce back with laughter and have another go at it.

Muriel never knew what was happening to her, though occasionally when there was a reference to Alzheimer's on TV she would muse aloud, "I wonder if I'll ever have that?" It did not seem painful for her, but it was a slow dying for me to watch the vibrant, creative, articulate person I knew and loved gradually dimming out.

I approached the college board of trustees with the need to begin the search for my successor. I told them that when the day came that Muriel needed me full-time, she would have me. I hoped that would not be necessary till I reached retirement, but at 57 it seemed unlikely I could hold on till 65. They should begin to make plans. But they intended for me to stay on forever, I guess, and made no move. That's not realistic, and probably not very responsible, I thought, though I appreciated the affirmation.

So began years of struggle with the question of what should be sacrificed: ministry or caring for Muriel. Should I put the kingdom of God first, "hate" my wife and, for the sake of Christ and the kingdom, arrange for institutionalization? Trusted, lifelong friends—wise and godly—urged me to do this.

"Muriel would become accustomed to the new environment quickly." Would she? Would anyone love her at all, let alone love her as I do? I had often seen the empty, listless faces of those lined up in wheelchairs along the corridors of such places, waiting, waiting for the fleeting visit of some loved one. In such an environment, Muriel would be tamed only with drugs or bodily restraints, of that I was confident.

People who do not know me well have said, "Well, you always said, 'God first, family second, ministry third.'" But I never said that. To put God first means that all other responsibilities he gives are first, too. Sorting out responsibilities that seem to conflict, however, is tricky business.

In 1988 we planned our first family reunion since the six children had left home, a week in a mountain retreat. Muriel delighted in her children and grandchildren, and they in her. Banqueting with all those gourmet cooks, making a quilt that pictured our life, scene by scene, playing games, singing, picking wild mountain blueberries was marvelous. We planned it as the celebration of our "fortieth" anniversary, although actually it was the thirty-ninth. We feared that by the fortieth she would no longer know us.

But she still knows us—three years later. She cannot comprehend much, nor express many thoughts, and those not for sure. But she knows whom she loves, and lives in happy oblivion to almost everything else.

She is such a delight to me. I don't have to care for her, I get to. One blessing is the way she is teaching me so much—about love, for example, God's love. She picks flowers outside—anyone's—and fills the house with them.

Lately she has begun to pick them inside, too. Someone had given us a beautiful Easter lily, two stems with four or five lilies on each, and more to come. One day I came into the kitchen and there on the window sill over the sink was a vase with a stem of lilies in it. I've learned to "go with the flow" and not correct irrational behavior. She means no harm and does not understand what should be done, nor would she remember a rebuke. Nevertheless, I did the irrational—I told her how disappointed I was, how the lilies would soon die, the buds would never bloom, and please do not break off the other stem.

The next day our youngest son, soon to leave for India came from Houston for his next-to-last visit. I told Kent of my rebuke of his mother and how bad I felt about it. As we sat on the porch swing, savoring each moment together, his mother came to the door with a gift of love for me: she carefully laid the other stem of lilies on the table with a gentle smile and turned back into the house. I said simply, "Thank you." Kent said, "You're doing better, Dad!"

Muriel cannot speak in sentences now, only in phrases and words, and often words that make little sense: "no" when she means "yes," for example. But she can say one sentence, and she says it often: "I love you."

She not only says it, she acts it. The board arranged for a companion to stay in our home so I could go daily to the office. During those two years it became increasingly difficult to keep Muriel home. As soon as I left, she would take out after me. With me, she was content; without me, she was distressed, sometimes terror stricken. The walk to school is a mile round trip. She would make that trip as many as ten times a day. Sometimes at night, when I helped her undress, I found bloody feet. When I told our family doctor, he choked up. "Such love," he said simply. Then, after a moment, "I have a theory that the characteristics developed across the years come out at times like these." I wish I loved God like that—desperate to be near him at all times. Thus she teaches me, day by day.

Friends and family often ask, "How are you doing?" meaning, I would take it, "How do you feel?" I am at a loss to respond. There is that subterranean grief that will not go away. I feel just as alone as if I had never known her as she was, I suppose, but the loneliness of the night hours comes because I did know her. Do I grieve for her

loss or mine? Further, there is the sorrow that comes from my increasing difficulty in meeting her needs.

But I guess my friends are asking not about her needs, but about mine. Or perhaps they wonder, in the contemporary jargon, how I am "coping," as they reflect on how the reputed indispensable characteristics of a good marriage have slipped away, one by one.

I came across the common contemporary wisdom in this morning's newspaper in a letter to a national columnist: "I ended the relationship because it wasn't meeting my needs," the writer explained. The counselor's response was predictable: "What were your needs that didn't get met by him in the relationship? Do you still have these same needs? What would he have to do to fill these needs? Could he do it?" Needs for communication, understanding, affirmation, common interests, sexual fulfillment—the list goes on. If the needs are not met, split. He offered no alternatives.

I once reflected on the eerie irrelevance of every one of those criteria for me. But I am not wired for introspection; I am more oriented outward and toward action and the future. I even feel an occasional surge of exhilaration as I find my present assignment more challenging than running an institution's complex ministry. Certainly greater creativity and flexibility are needed.

I have long lists of "coping strategies," which have to be changed weekly, sometimes daily. Grocery shopping together may have been recreation, but it is not so much fun when Muriel begins to load other people's carts and take off with them, disappearing into the labyrinth of supermarket aisles. Or how do you get a person to eat or take a bath when she steadfastly refuses? It is not like meeting a \$10 million budget or designing a program to grasp some emerging global opportunity, to be sure. And it is not as public or exhilarating. But it demands greater resources than I could have imagined, and thus highlights more clearly than ever my own inadequacies, as well as provides constant opportunity to draw on our Lord's vast reservoir of resources.

As she needed more and more of me, I wrestled daily with the question of who gets me full-time-Muriel or Columbia Bible College and Seminary? Dr. Tabor advised me not to make any decision based on my desire to see Muriel stay contented. "Make your plans apart from that question. Whether or not you can be successful in your dreams for the college and seminary or not, I cannot judge, but I can tell you now, you will not be successful with Muriel."

When the time came, the decision was firm. It took no great calculation. It was a matter of integrity. Had I not promised, 42 years before, "in sickness and in health . . . till death do us part"?

This was no grim duty to which I stoically resigned, however. It was only fair. She had, after all, cared for me for almost four decades with marvelous devotion; now it was my turn. And such a partner she was! If I took care of her for 40 years, I would never be out of her debt.

But how could I walk away from the responsibility of a ministry God had blessed so signally during our 22 years at Columbia Bible College and Seminary?

Not easily. True, many dreams had been fulfilled. But so many dreams were yet on the drawing board. And the peerless team God had brought together-a team not just of professionals, but of dear friends-how could I bear to leave them? Resignation was painful; but the right path was not difficult to discern. Whatever Columbia needed, it did not need a part-time, distracted leader. It is better to move out and let God designate a leader to step in while the momentum is continuing.

No, it was not a choice between two loves. Sometimes that kind of choice becomes necessary, but this time responsibilities did not conflict. I suppose responsibilities in the will of God never conflict (though my evaluation of those responsibilities is fallible). Am I making the right choice at the right time in the right way? I hope so. This time it seemed clearly in the best interest of the ministry for me to step down, even if board and administrators thought otherwise. Both loves-for Muriel and for Columbia Bible College and Seminarydictated the same choice. There was no conflict of loves, then, or of obligations.

I have been startled by the response to the announcement of my resignation. Husbands and wives renew marriage vows, pastors tell the story to their congregations. It was a mystery to me, until a distinguished oncologist, who lives constantly with dying people, told me, "Almost all women stand by their men; very few men stand by their women." Perhaps people sensed this contemporary tragedy and somehow were helped by a simple choice I considered the only option.

It is all more than keeping promises and being fair, however. As I watch her brave descent into oblivion, Muriel is the joy of my life. Daily I discern new manifestations of the kind of person she is, the wife I always loved. I also see fresh manifestations of God's love-the God I long to love more fully. 11

Robertson McQuilkin recently resigned as president of Columbia Bible College and Seminary, Columbia, South Carolina, after which he was named chancellor, a position that draws on his expertise while still allowing him to care for his wife.

CT Classic: Muriel's Blessing

Despite the toll of his wife's Alzheimer's, a husband marvels at the mystery of love.

By Robertson McQuilkin | posted 02/09/2004

In "Living by Vows" (Oct. 1990) Robertson McQuilkin told Christianity Today readers about life with his wife, Muriel, who had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's. Because his wife needed full-time care, he had decided to step down as president of Columbia Bible College and Seminary (now Columbia International University) in South Carolina and give back to her some of the nurturing care she had provided him for so many years. Over the past five years, Muriel's condition has continued to deteriorate—and Robertson has gained even more insights into the mysteries of love and marriage.

Seventeen summers ago, Muriel and I began our journey into the twilight. It's midnight now, at least for her, and sometimes I wonder when dawn will break. Even the dread Alzheimer's disease isn't supposed to attack so early and torment so long. Yet, in her silent world, Muriel is so content, so lovable. If Jesus took her home, how I would miss her gentle, sweet presence. Yes, there are times when I get irritated, but not often. It doesn't make sense to get angry. And besides, perhaps the Lord has been answering the prayer of my youth to mellow my spirit.

Once, though, I completely lost it. In the days when Muriel could still stand and walk and we had not resorted to diapers, sometimes there were "accidents." I was on my knees beside her, trying to clean up the mess as she stood, confused, by the toilet. It would have been easier if she weren't so insistent on helping. I got more and more frustrated. Suddenly, to make her stand still, I slapped her calf—as if that would do any good. It wasn't a hard slap, but she was startled. I was, too. Never in our 44 years of marriage had I ever so much as touched her in anger or in rebuke of any kind. Never; wasn't even tempted, in fact. But now, when she needed me most ...

Sobbing, I pled with her to forgive me—no matter that she didn't understand words any better than she could speak them. So I turned to the Lord to tell him how sorry I was. It took me days to get over it. Maybe God bottled those tears to quench the fires that might ignite again some day.

It wasn't long before I found myself in the same condition, on the floor in the bathroom. Muriel wanted to help—hadn't cleaning up messes been her specialty? But now those busy hands didn't know exactly what to do. I mopped frantically, trying to fend off the interfering hands, and contemplated how best to get a soiled slip over a head that was totally opposed to the idea. At that moment Chuck Swindoll boomed from the radio in the kitchen, "Men! Are you at home? Really at home?" In the midst of my stinking immersion I smiled, "Yeah, Chuck, I really am." Do I ever wish I weren't?

Recently, a student wife asked me that. Cindi has sort of adopted us. As we sat at the kitchen table sipping coffee, she said, "Don't you ever get tired?"

"Tired? Every night. That's why I go to bed."

"No, I mean tired of ... " and she tilted her head toward Muriel, who sat silently in her wheelchair, her vacant eyes saying, "No one at home just now." I responded to

Cindi's question, "Why, no, I don't get tired. I love to care for her. She's my precious."

"Well, I certainly would."

Cindi and her husband are handsome, healthy, smart people, and yet she admits that it is hard constantly to affirm one another. What happens when there is so little to commend? How does love make a difference?

Love is said to evaporate if the relationship is not mutual, if it's not physical, if the other person doesn't communicate, or if one party doesn't carry his or her share of the load. When I hear the litany of essentials for a happy marriage, I count off what my beloved can no longer contribute, and I contemplate how truly mysterious love is.

What's Love Got To Do With It?

The five-column headline read: "Love Helps Alzheimer's Victims Survive, Study Says." The reporter wrote: "What's love got to do with it? Just about everything, says a researcher who studied what happens in a marriage when a spouse gets Alzheimer's disease." In Prof. Lore Wright's study of 47 couples over a two-year period, she had predicted with 100 percent accuracy who would die first, based on her analysis of the love relationship between husband and wife.

I attended a workshop in which another expert told us that there were two reasons people keep a family member at home rather than in a nursing facility: economic necessity or feelings of guilt. Afterwards I spoke with her privately, trying to elicit some other possible motive for keeping someone at home. But she insisted those were the only two motives. Finally I asked, "What about love?" "Oh," she replied, "we put that under guilt." So much for love.

What some people find so hard to understand is that loving Muriel isn't hard. They wonder about my former loves—like my work. A college freshman heard that I had resigned as president of Columbia International University to care for my wife. "Do you miss being president?" Scott asked as we sat in our little garden. I told him I'd never thought about it, but, on reflection, no. As exhilarating as my work had been, I enjoyed learning to cook and keep house. No, I'd never looked back.

But that night I did reflect on his question and turned to the Lord. "Father, I like this assignment, and I have no regrets. But if a coach puts a man on the bench, he must not want him in the game. You needn't tell me, of course, but I'd like to know—why didn't you need me in the game?"

I didn't sleep well that night and awoke contemplating the puzzle. Muriel was still mobile at that time, so we set out on our morning walk around the block. She wasn't too sure on her feet, so we went slowly and held hands as we always do. This day I heard footsteps behind me and looked back to see the familiar form of a local derelict behind us. He staggered past us, then turned and looked us up and down. "Tha's good. I likes 'at," he said. "Tha's real good. I likes it." He turned and headed back down the street, mumbling to himself over and over, "Tha's good. I likes it."

When Muriel and I reached our little garden and sat down, his words came back to me. Then the realization hit me; the Lord had spoken through an inebriated old derelict. "It is you who are whispering to my spirit, 'I likes it, tha's good,' " I said aloud. "I may be on the bench, but if you like it and say it's good, that's all that counts."

Some of my best friends don't agree. One wrote last week, "Muriel doesn't know you anymore, doesn't know anything, really, so it's time to put her in a nursing home and get on with life." That day may come—when, because of a change in my health or hers, she could be better cared for by others—but for now, she needs me, and I need her.

The Good Life

"How do you do it? What are your resources?" asked the host on the television show Day of Discovery. I hadn't thought about it, but since then I have. Praise helps. Right now, I think my life must be happier than the lives of 95 percent of the people on planet Earth. Muriel's a joy to me, and life is good to both of us, in different ways. But I'm thinking of something more basic than just "counting your blessings."

By 1992, the blows of life had left me numb—my dearest slipping from me, my eldest son snatched away in a tragic accident, my life's work abandoned at its peak. I didn't hold it against God, but my faith could better be described as resignation. The joy had drained away, the passion in my love for God had frozen over. I was in trouble. If the only Companion you have in the lonely hours grows distant ...

Of course, the passion of his love for me had never cooled. Even in the darkest hours when I felt my grip slipping and was in danger of sliding into the abyss of doubt, what always caught and held me was the vision of God's best loved, pinioned in criminal execution in my place. How could someone who loved me that much let anything hurt me without cause? But still, a one-sided love affair isn't very satisfactory. I missed the intimate companionship.

Then I remembered the secret I had learned in younger days—going to a mountain hideaway to be alone with God. There, though it was slow in coming, I was able to break free from preoccupation with my troubles and concentrate on Jesus. When that happened, I relearned what God had taught me more than once before: the heavy heart lifts on the wings of praise.

I have other resources: family, like my sisters, who have retired one by one and moved back to Columbia from the ends of the earth. They care for us lovingly; and friends do, too. It won't do to cultivate friends for the payback—that's not true friendship. But, I've concluded, those who don't build friendships in the spring and summer of life must find winter a lonely time.

Memories help, too. Muriel stocked the cupboard of my mind with the best of them. I often live again a special moment of love she planned or laugh at some remembered outburst of her irrepressible approach to life. Sometimes the happy doesn't bubble up with joy but rains down gently with tears. In the movie *Shadowlands*, when Joy Gresham reminds C. S. Lewis that their joy would soon end, that she would die, he replies that he doesn't want to think about it. Joy responds, "The pain is part of the happiness. That's the deal."

It's true. Recently, Muriel's right hand went limp—her first major decline since she lost the abilities to stand and to feed herself 18 months before. A little loss, you would think, but I shed a few tears. I wrote in my journal that night, "It's almost like part of me dies with each of her little deaths." That precious hand was so creative, so loving, so busy for me and everyone else. But it wasn't just the old memories. That right hand was the last way she had to communicate. She would reach out to hold hands, pat me on the back when I hugged her, push me away when she didn't like what I was doing. I miss her hand.

Memories are both sweet and bittersweet. I often remember her repartee. Once I remonstrated that she didn't know everything. "I don't know everything?" she shot back. "Why, I know more than everything. I know some things that aren't so!" Once in reply to her request to do something, I said I was already doing something else. "Well, it's a poor man that can't do two things at once," she said. Muriel, being a woman, could do three things at once, of course, which she did. But not always. "I'm a selective quitter," she'd announce and cheerfully abandon a project. "If it's worth doing, it's worth doing well? Pshaw. Very few things in this life are worth doing well." Once, before we signed off for sleep, I was winning the argument with irresistible logic when she raised up on one elbow, transfixed me with fire in her grey-green eyes, and said, "Well, let me tell you something. Logic's not everything, and feeling's not nothing." In the uninterrupted silences of today, the memories of sweet and spicy talk long gone bring pleasure once again.

It's just as well I have those memories of past conversations, for she hasn't spoken a coherent word in months—years, if you mean a sentence, a conversation—though occasionally she tries, mumbling nonwords. Would I never hear that voice again?

Then came February 14, 1995.

I'm No Victim

Valentine's Day was always special at our house because that was the day in 1948 Muriel accepted my marriage proposal. On the eve of Valentine's Day in 1995 I read a statement by some specialist that Alzheimer's is the most cruel disease of all, but that the victim is actually the caregiver. I wondered why I never felt like a victim. That night I entered in my journal: "The reason I don't feel like a victim is—I'm not!" When others urged me to call it quits, I responded, "Do you realize how lonely I would be without her?"

After I bathed Muriel on her bed that Valentine's eve and kissed her good night (she still enjoys two things: good food and kissing!), I whispered a prayer over her: "Dear Jesus, you love sweet Muriel more than I, so please keep my beloved through the night; may she hear the angel choirs."

The next morning I was peddling on my Exercycle at the foot of her bed and reminiscing about some of our happy lovers' days long gone while Muriel slowly emerged from sleep. Finally, she popped awake and, as she often does, smiled at me. Then, for the first time in months she spoke, calling out to me in a voice clear as a crystal chime, "Love ... love ... love." I jumped from my cycle and ran to embrace her. "Honey, you really do love me, don't you?" Holding me with her eyes and patting my back, she responded with the only words she could find to say yes: "I'm nice," she said. ...Those may prove to be the last words she ever spoke.

The Gradual Grief of Alzheimer's

Robertson McQuilkin reflects on his wife's long battle with Alzheimer's.

Interview by Stan Guthrie | posted 02/09/2004

It has been 25 years since Alzheimer's began taking hold of Muriel McQuilkin, wife of Robertson McQuilkin, president of Columbia Bible College and its graduate school. As the disease progressed, in 1990, McQuilkin resigned to care for his wife full time. She stopped recognizing him in 1993. At Christianity Today's invitation, McQuilkin wrote two articles about his decision and caring for his wife ("[Living by Vows](#)," CT, October 8, 1990, and "[Muriel's Blessing](#)," CT, Feb. 5, 1996. On September 20, 2003, Muriel McQuilkin died at the age of 81.

Stan Guthrie, CT's associate news editor, was a graduate student at the school when McQuilkin announced his resignation. Guthrie interviewed McQuilkin, 76, shortly after Muriel's death.

What was your daily routine like, especially toward the end?

I would fix breakfast and then go in and turn on the lights, and she would awaken, although in the last year or two she didn't open her eyes much. Usually in the morning she would open her eyes and then I would feed her. And then of course, after that I had to change and clean her up. If it was nice weather, I would put her in the wheel chair and take her out into the yard for her to sit out there for two or three or four hours. Then lunch. She had to be changed every four hours.

She had excellent health, so I usually had about six hours a day of quiet to do my own writing and business and so forth.

In the evening we would again have supper, and after supper about 9:00 I'd start working on the bedtime routine.

But last summer she began to choke on the food.

It must have been difficult to care for her at that level, almost as if she were a newborn again.

Well, she was not burdensome. She was always lovable and accepted my ministrations, for the most part. She was low maintenance.

Some people sort of resent the imposition, but those thoughts never came to me. I thought it was a privilege to care for her. She had always cared for me. So it was not a burden. In fact, if it had been a burden, maybe there wouldn't be so much grief now, that sense of loss.

I assume you were even grieving while she was alive. Did that process take away any of the grieving that you're feeling now?

I don't see how I could have any more grief. Actually, 25 years, that is so gradual, so incremental that there wasn't time to think about [grieving her loss]. My memories were all happy memories. I'd review them to her as long as she had any consciousness. I really even chatted to her after she wasn't aware of anything.

My children, who all live at a distance, all said that they grieved her loss way back at the beginning, when she no longer knew them. But I never went through that kind of process.

How aware of you was she?

She lost that 10 years ago.

What surprised you during the time of caring for her?

Everything. You don't know what's coming next, but you're not surprised that something *is* next. I didn't try to predict whether when she died I was going to greatly grieve or I wasn't going to greatly grieve or whether I was going to feel this or that. I still don't know what I feel. The churning of emotions, just grief, is all I can call it.

What did this experience teach you about the Christian life? You've written a book on Christian ethics and have had to apply a lot of it.

Since I've tried to base my life on bringing my choices under the authority of Scripture, and I made the decision early on that it was non-negotiable, I didn't really have struggles about what to do. As I told the students when I resigned from school, this was one of the easiest decisions I ever made.

But did I learn things? Yes. For example, one day I was ministering to [Muriel], taking care of her, and I said, "Honey, you're the luckiest girl on earth. You don't have a worry in the world. You don't have anything to plan; everything is provided for you. Why, you don't even have any guilt; you don't have any sin to repent of."

Then I thought about [the fact that] I loved her but she can't love me back. For some years after she went to bed, in the morning our eyes would connect briefly, I mean *really* connect. She was aware of my presence, and she'd gaze at me and smile. Her trademark, of course, during her life, was her laugh, her smile. And when she did, I would fly a flag out front because I wanted my friends and neighbors to know this is a smile day. But then in the last three or four years, there weren't any smile days.

At any rate, I would love her, but she couldn't love me back, and that's a painful thing. As I was leaning over her that day, I thought, "Lord, is that the way it is between you and me? You pouring out your love and care so consciously, and what do you get back—a brief salute in the morning, we connect, grumbling when I don't get what I want, when you don't do it the way I like?" How sad—sad for him.

Obviously, you have said it was a privilege and only fair that you care for her. But do you ever think about what you may have given up to care for her?

I don't feel like I've given anything up. Our life is not the way we plot it or plan it. And so I guess all along I've just accepted whatever assignment the Lord gave me. This was his assignment. I know I'm not supposed to have that kind of reaction, but you asked me, and I have to be honest.

I often tell the story of how early on, about two years after I resigned, a young couple came out [to visit], and the man said, "Do you miss being president?" And I said, "You know, I never thought about it. But now that you asked, no, I don't. I enjoy my assignment. I like learning how to cook and garden and keep house, and taking care of my beloved." At that time she was still responding to loving care.

But that night, after I went to bed, I thought, "Lord, I never asked you why. I'm apt to ask you, 'Why *not* me?' Everybody is suffering; everybody has loss and heartache. It's part of our human, fallen condition. So you know I don't ask why. It's your business; you're the one in charge. But, if a coach puts his player on the bench, he must not need him in the game. And you don't have to tell me why you don't need me in the game. But sometime, if you'd like to, I'd much appreciate it."

So I went on to sleep. The next day, [Muriel] was still walking sort of wobbly, and we went out for our walk around the block. I'd have to hold her hand to balance her. I heard this shuffling behind me. I looked back and here's a local derelict. He looked us up and down. And then he said, "Tha's good—tha's real good. I like that." And then he wandered off, mumbling, "Tha's so good." And I chuckled.

When we got back to the garden and sat down, all of a sudden, it hit me. I said, "Lord could you speak to me through a half-inebriated voice of an old derelict? You did, and if you say it's good, that's all I needed to hear."

So I had that assurance all along, that this was my assignment and was pleasing to him.

Have any others told you that they've chosen to drop their professional responsibilities to care for their spouses?

Oh, I get that all the time. I don't take credit for any of those decisions people make. But they write to tell me about it.

How would you counsel someone facing similar circumstances?

I learned early on that everybody is different. The rate of loss of function is totally different [with different patients]. I tell people, "Don't try to predict." When Muriel was first diagnosed, my doctor gave me a medical journal article that said it was seven years average life span, from diagnosis to death. So I planned accordingly. Now I tell people, "Don't plan, don't try to project, or you'll just be continuously frustrated and startled. Just trust the Lord."

Of course, I read every bit of literature I can get on Alzheimer's, so I don't mean to go forward ignorantly. [But] everybody differs, so be careful about your predictions.

The greatest problem is unrealistic expectations. We naturally want to hold our loved ones to what they were. Whatever they were at the last stage, we try to hold them

to that, instead of accepting them for what they are. When a caregiver tries to keep them where they were, this is dreadfully frustrating for the caregiver and for the one receiving the care. It just makes a hell on earth really.

I never went to a support group. I had enough of my own burdens without taking on everybody else's. Sometimes I have accepted an invitation to speak at one of these [groups.] A lot of angry people. They're angry at God for letting this happen—"Why me?" They're angry at the one they care for, and then they feel guilty about it because they can't explain why they're angry at them, but they are. And they're angry at themselves. Just terrible frustration. So I say, in acceptance there's peace.

I remember this one friend who told me that his wife was starting what he feared would be Alzheimer's. So I asked how the people at church felt, and he said, "Well, they don't know." I said, "How do your children feel about it?" He said, "I haven't told them."

I went to their home, and it was dreadful. She was in full agitation all the time. She pulled me aside and told me dreadful things that she imagined, made up. She was in a hallucinatory stage. And I watched him. He would say, "Honey, that's not an egg; that's a stone."

I said, "Man, just accept her as she is." He said, "I can't lie." I said, "I'm not asking you to lie, but when she says something outrageous, just say, 'Well, you feel strongly about that, don't you?' or something of that nature." He said, "I've lived for truth all my life." I said, "You're going to destroy yourself and her."

A few months later, I went back and [the home] was totally transformed. He said it nearly killed him, but he had accepted her. And she called me aside to tell me how she never experienced such love in her whole life.

My wife was never aware that she had Alzheimer's, but this woman was, and she said it's worth it.

Accept them as they are. Don't try to change them or hold them back to what they used to be.

What's next for you?

I don't try to project anything. I'm still getting it together. I found a wonderful quote from Mark Twain today that was a big help: "It is one of the mysteries of our nature that a man, all unprepared, can receive a thunder-stroke like that and live. There is but one reasonable explanation of it. The intellect is stunned by the shock, and but gropingly gathers the meaning of the words. The power to realize their full import is mercifully wanting. The mind has a dumb sense of vast loss—that is all. It will take mind and memory months, and possibly years, to gather together the details, and thus learn and know the whole extent of the loss."