

Lorraine Culbertson stood beside the hospital bed looking down at herself. Well, she couldn't actually see herself anymore, since the nurse had pulled the sheet up over her face. The nurse...wasn't her name Deborah? Yes, that was the name Lorraine remembered reading, stenciled in bright orange letters on the nurse's blue name-badge before Lorraine had slipped away into the coma.

The nurse, Deborah had actually been very sweet. After turning off the monitor and pulling out the IV tubes with which they had kept Lorraine hydrated at the end, the young nurse had paused by the bedside, bowed her head and evidently said a short, silent prayer before whispering "Amen" and leaving the room.

Of course, the nurse had been unaware of Lorraine's soul standing there by the draped form of herself, or what people politely termed Lorraine's "remains" which were lying there between the bars of the hospital bed, covered by the bilious green sheet, a hideous color of bed linens only used by hospitals. The nurse couldn't see Lorraine's spirit, because the living were not permitted to see the souls of the departed while they hovered around at their passing, waiting to go...where?

That, after all, was the key question. Where exactly was she going? Lorraine shivered at that thought, even though in her Spiritual form she was quite unaffected by earthly things like heat or cold. She had always believed in life after death, had been convinced of the things she had heard in Sunday school and later from the pulpit. And now her beliefs were confirmed. She was indeed here, in fleshless Spirit, having truly shuffled off her mortal coil. So, what happens next?

She knew that she had led a life with a firm belief that Jesus was indeed Lord. She had been active in her church, had kept a regular discipline of prayer which she had found so very rewarding, particularly in this last year-and-a-half as the cancer had slowly and painfully gnawed away more and more of her body. Prayer had truly been her great help in this darkest, most painful season.

But her life had been so bland, so ordinary. Lorraine had never married, although she had come close a couple of times. She had taught elementary school for 17 years in the county where three generations of her family had lived and had certainly been faithful to her students. In the last two school terms, she had even experienced the great satisfaction of teaching the children of pupils who had passed through her classroom in the previous decade.

But had hers been a life well-lived? Would the God of heaven look her in the eye and say, "Yes, Lorraine, well done my good and faithful servant?" Or would there be some other outcome from the meeting that she presumed was waiting just beyond the horizon of her eternity?

And as this question of eternal destination slowly revolved in the wheels and cogs of her mind, that was the point at which the door had opened, and Mickey Rooney had walked into the hospital room.

"Hi ya Lorraine, how ya doin'?"

Lorraine stammered, "You...you can see me?"

"You betcha!," Mickey replied. "I can see ya fine, large as life...well, at least large as the ***after-life.***"

At that point, the Angel slapped his thigh and cackled with that boyish glee, that laugh only Mickey Rooney can laugh.

“But,” Lorraine asked in confusion, “Aren’t you Mickey Rooney?”

“Yeah, I know. That’s what I look like, don’t I. But naagh, I just look like Mickey. I’m really the Angel of Death.”

“The Angel of Death?”

“At your service; that’s me! I can actually adopt any image, but lately I’ve been using Mickey Rooney. You see, whenever I come to escort people into the Kingdom, I want to appear as a none-threatening personality, things usually having been so traumatic for most people at the end. And who could be a less threatening companion for the walk into the eternal sunset than Mickey Rooney. So, you ready?”

“You escort people into the Kingdom,” Lorraine said. “You mean, I’m not going to...”

“To the other place? Naw! If that had been your destination, you’d already be there, and I wouldn’t be here. That’s not my job, to take people down there. In fact, there’s nobody in the Kingdom assigned for that task. You see, when someone’s bound for...the other place, when they die they just wake up in unspeakable misery and darkness. And there’s really no way to prepare the human soul for that. I only come to lead souls to the Kingdom. So, what do you say, Lorraine? Ya ready to blow this joint?” With that, the diminutive form of the young Mickey Rooney opened the hospital room door, bowed, and with a flourish of his hand said, “After you, my lady!”

As they walked out into the hospital corridor, Lorraine saw that it was meal time. The cart with the prepared trays of hospital food was standing in the middle of the hallway. An orderly in baggy green hospital garb was just going into the room next to Lorraine’s with somebody’s lunch. A doctor in a white lab coat with a stethoscope poking out of her left jacket pocket was reading a chart as she walked toward them. Nobody noticed Lorraine and Mickey as they strode down the hallway because nobody could see them.

Lorraine struggled for words as she walked, “Uh...Mickey, I mean, Angel...”

“Just call me Mickey. My real name is in an ancient language you couldn’t pronounce anyway.”

“OK...Mickey...is there anything you can tell me about where we’re going, about the Kingdom.”

“Well, I could try. But it wouldn’t do much good. Of-course, you’ve read about it some in John’s letter. And old Jonnie did a really good job describing heaven too...for a human. But human words can’t really capture the utter beauty and peace of the Kingdom. Besides, I’ve got a suspicion that The Father has a pretty special place in mind for you. I mean, after all, you’re a heavy hitter up there.”

At these words Lorraine stopped dead in her tracks. “Me, somebody special? Oh no, you must have me confused with somebody else. I mean, what did I ever do in my life?”

And now, Mickey stopped as well and looked at her open mouthed. “What, nobody special? What nonsense! Your life has been huge news in the Kingdom for years. Why, I saw the crew from Heavenly Hostess Catering preparing a special welcoming banquet for you on my way down here.”

“But,” Lorraine mumbled, “But why? I didn’t do anything special with my life.”

A look of slow realization grew on Mickey’s face and he smiled. “Oh, I get it. I was forgetting what a really limited view the human being has. Here, Lorraine, let me show ya somethin’” At this point, the Angel lifted his right arm and flicked his first and second finger. A

kind of hole opened in the right-hand wall of the hospital hallway, and Lorraine found herself looking at a family holding hands around a dinner table, saying grace over their evening meal. It was a father, a mother and three young children, all boys.

“That’s Roger Samuels and his wife Beatrice with their three kids,” the Angel said.

“But, I taught a boy named Roger Samuels in my Sunday school class last year.”

“Yep,” Mickey confirmed. “That’s Roger twenty years from now. Because of what he learned from you about the importance of family in your Sunday School class, twenty years from now Roger and Beatrice Samuels will adopt three children in the foster care system. One of those boys – the one in the middle there at the table – he will grow up to found one of the most active churches on the Chicago’s South Side. That wonderful church will lead hundreds of people to the Lord.”

Now, the Angel lifted his left arm and performed the same kind of two-fingered flick of the wrist. Another hole opened, this time on the left wall of the hospital hallway. Lorraine saw a hospital operating room. At first she thought it might be the OR in the hospital where she and the Angel were standing. But then Lorraine realized that much of the equipment in this operating room consisted of things she had never seen before.

Mickey explained. “That’s an operating room in a neo-natal hospital in San Francisco twenty-five years from now. They specialize in corrective surgery for infants. You can’t really tell because of the mask she’s wearing, but the surgeon operating there is Melissa Simonson.”

“Melissa Simonson,” Lorraine whispered in wonder. “You mean...”

“Yep. The little girl with red hair and freckles you taught in your third grade class, three years ago. Did you notice how fascinated Melissa was every time you talked about plants and animals and natural science? Do you remember how particularly mesmerized she was by the experiment your class performed, growing one bean plant in a pot on the window sill, and another in a pot locked away in a dark closet? You lit a fire in that little girl’s mind, and it never went out. Melissa will devote the rest of her life to making sure every child who passes through that clinic in San Francisco has a fighting chance at a normal life.”

And now, the Angel lifted both hands and a desk appeared in the middle of the hallway. It was one of those miniature tables that elementary schools have, and there was a tiny girl sitting there completely enthralled by a book. Lorraine thought she recognized the little girl with the dark hair and those glasses that seemed to cover most of her face. She said, “Why, isn’t that Brenda Adamson?”

“You betcha! Brenda Adamson.” The Angel walked a little closer to the vision of the child and book he had conjured in the middle of the hospital hallway. “Brenda Adamson, age 8-and-three-quarters. Brenda Adamson, the little girl with the big glasses. In your class last year, you were the first person who had ever taken the time to show an interest in that child of God. Did you know, Lorraine, that you were the one – not mom, not dad, but you were the first human being who ever treated that little girl with any kind of praise and real affection. And because of the love and attention that Brenda received in your classroom, she now has a confidence she never had before. She has become secure enough to believe, to really believe she can make something of herself. And she has fallen in love with reading. Brenda will go on reading everything she can get her hands on for the rest of her life.

“Brenda Adamson will graduate on full scholarship from one of the finest universities in the country and will take on the same job as the person who has come to be her life’s model.

Because of you, Lorraine, that little girl will become a teacher. And she will travel to Southwest China and work for the rest of her life in a mission school there, teaching thousands of children about the joyful confidence that comes from being the person God meant each of us to be.”

Lorraine couldn't say anything. She and the Angel stood there in silence, watching the little girl's fingers chase the lines of text across the page she was reading, her tiny mouth forming the words silently as she read.

Then the Angel said, “You probably remember the passage from Luke Chapter 12, about the faithful servant being ready to receive The Lord at any hour of the day or night. So many people think that passage means we always need to be ready to die in a state of grace. But, what God was really saying in that passage is that the true believer is always ready to **live** in a state of abundant faith, every single day of his life – no matter how bland or even painful some days might seem.”

“Lorraine,” the Angel put his right hand on her left shoulder and looked deeply into her eyes. “Lorraine, every human being is allocated a certain number of heart-beats by God. And every one of those two-billion beats of the human heart can be put toward either good or ill. The true believer, the one who accomplishes mighty deeds for the Kingdom, that kind of believer is the one who dedicates every day to seeing Jesus in the face of everyone around her, regardless of their warts. That kind of believer is absolutely committed to bringing Jesus into the life of each person who crosses her path, no matter how insignificant some of those encounters might seem. That kind of Christian never lets go of her faith in believing that each encounter we have in this life is brought about by God, and can be used to glorify Him. That kind of Christian is always ready to live for The Lord, no matter the time or place. In short, Lorraine, that kind of Christian is you.”

The Angel turned and began walking slowly down the hospital corridor. Lorraine took one last look at the vision of Brenda Adamson at her tiny table, and then she turned and followed the Angel toward an elevator on the right-hand side of the hospital hallway. Lorraine didn't remember this elevator being there when she had been admitted several weeks before. The doors to this elevator shown with a kind of luster, brighter than any polished metal she had ever seen. When the Angel reached out and pressed the elevator button, Lorraine noticed that there was only an “up” arrow and no button to press for going to any lower place.

There was a whirring sound, and a silver clear bell rang as the elevator doors slowly drew open. She smiled into the light of rainbow colors that shown from inside that elevator, and taking the hand of the Angel of Death – AKA Mickey Rooney – Lorraine Culbertson stepped into the elevator car and went home to be with her Lord.”

***Being Ready to Live (Reflection on Lk.12:35-40):*** At the end of the 1990 film *Ghost*, as Patrick Swayze is walking into the horizon of heaven, he turns back to the camera and says, “You get to take all your love with you.” That's really what ***Being Ready to Live*** is all about.

At various times in the history of the Christian church, theologians have seemed to promote an attitude of fearful watchfulness concerning The Lord's return to this world – or our departure from it. Believers were expected to have their “T's crossed and I's dotted” at all times, to assure their entry into heaven on the appointed day. In historical accounts from the Middle-Ages and in novels set in those times you may read descriptions of people being

“shriven” near their time of death, in order to receive absolution from a Priest and thereby win the assurance of their citizenry in God’s heavenly Kingdom.

For at least a thousand years in Catholic theology, a special day dedicated for Confession and the clearing out of the soul has been Shrove Tuesday, marking the beginning of Lent. Many Protestant denominations still mark at least the cultural memory of this belief in the tradition of eating pancakes and sausage on Shrove Tuesday, which symbolically marks the clearing out of rich foods such as oil and meat before beginning the purer and leaner diet of Lent (one hopes a diet that is not only physical but spiritual as well!).<sup>1</sup>

It is certainly a mistake to believe that the Christian witness is a walk on egg shells, a game of celestial hop-scotch, whereby we must always be sure not to land with our feet in a crack, lest that moment when we draw our final breath find us in some way ill prepared. Surely even my much-loved Catholic brothers and sisters would agree that this type of ever-fearful, obsessive dread of somehow coming up short in God’s eyes is not the joyous walk to the Cross that Our Lord intends for his children. I find it comforting that the type of watchfulness Jesus commends to His disciples in this chapter of Luke comes hand in glove with His caution against worry in that same chapter (see Lk.12:22-34).

When I was a Seminary student, one of the staff members whose company I found particularly joyful had a sign on her door. It had a picture of the Christ standing in front of an office with His hand on the door-knob, getting ready to open the door. Below the picture there was a caption which read, “Jesus is coming...quick, look busy!” That’s the type of whimsical, joyful, laughing testimony which I find particularly contagious in the Christian witness, and that I believe should accompany through life all those who are committed to working for the Lord’s return. That’s the type of loving, joyous, giving life that Lorraine Culbertson has lived in **Being Ready to Live**. There is no dread or fear involved in the true Christian testimony. Paul had this point clearly in his mind when he wrote to his young friend Timothy, (see 2Tim.1:7).

The value of our lives in God’s eyes must be the love we take with us when we go to meet Him. That is the true measure of a life well-lived. On the night Our Lord began His Passion, He assures us that a true disciple is one who bears much fruit (see Jn.15:7-8). This is just after



*The Carrying of the Cross* by Francesco Laurana, Sculpture at Palais des Papes, Avignon, France (Summer, 2009)

He has given us the new commandment to love each other as He had loved us (see Jn. 13:34). So the fruit that a follower of the Christ bears during his life of witness is the product born out in his selfless love for others. A Christian is not just someone who is always ready to die for The Lord. Instead, the true Christian is always ready and joyously willing to **live** for Jesus.

<sup>1</sup>Amanda Rice, “Religions: Lent,” *The Religion Page*, BBC Media Centre, June 22 2009, July 10, 2012 <[www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/holydays/lent\\_1.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/holydays/lent_1.shtml)>.