

# Keep Your Eyes On The Prize

by Kelly Dobbs

*She sang while we sat on the front porch swing.*

*On warm summer evenings, we sat in the swing until the mosquitoes started to bite. We rarely talked. She would sing church hymns to me.*

*The fading light gave me glimpses of what She must have looked like ages ago. With each "Amazing Grace," the wrinkles faded a little more. With each "Keep Your Eyes on the Prize," the gray hair deepened to black.*

*I leaned against her as the evening wore on to take away the chill of the night air; She pulled me close.*

*She sang while we sat on the front porch swing during summer afternoons.*

*We'd sit on the swing and string green beans to the soothing rocking motion. Rocking made the work go easier; I swear the bag of beans never emptied.*

*I'd try to break as many beans as She did. She always won that race, but never let on that She knew I was trying to beat her; She just quietly kept working.*

*On these afternoons, She taught me the words to the hymns by repeating the same ones over and over again.*

*She sang while we sat on the front porch swing, and I thought She was the best singer in the world.*

When eyes of blind ones see a-gain  
And ears of deaf one's hear a-gain

"For the living are conscious that they will die; but as for the dead, they are conscious of nothing at all."

"That's in Ee-clee-zee-ass-tees 9:5, remember it and take comfort in it, because it is the word of Jehovah God the Almighty." Grandma liked to preach during the commercials of the Five O'Clock News, Six O'Clock News, and the Evening News.

I preferred to watch the commercials.

When she had opened the door with Bible in hand, I knew. Required to "work for Jehovah" at least 40 hours a month, she usually chose to "work" on me.

But, tonight I was prepared.

I'd read the *Watchtower* magazine she made Mom mail me, I knew some significant verses I could throw around like a name dropper at a cocktail party,

and I brushed up on The Great Teacher, a book she'd made me read every year since I was six.

Yes, sirree, I was prepared for anything except a discussion on death. She chose death as the evening's topic.

*Grandma hummed while I plucked hairs from her chin.*

*I sat in her lap, and with a pair of tweezers, I pulled the long, gray hairs that grew from the mole on her chin. She said her eyes weren't sharp enough for her to see them, but my young eyes could see the "hair on a fly." I always giggled at that.*

*It never occurred to me that pulling chin hairs was unusual. It was just one of the things I did with her. One of the things we did.*

*Grandma hummed while I picked hairs from her chin, even when I gave one a good yank. She never winced.*

*Only years later, when I started plucking my eyebrows, did I realize I had caused her pain.*

*Grandma hummed while I plucked hairs from her chin, and I hummed right along with her.*

When des - erts blo - som as the rose  
And from parched ground fresh wa - ter flows,

"'A name is better than good oil, and the day of death than the day of one's being born.' Someday, the dead will arise, and I'll be with them. I hope my family will be among the blessed; you'll be among the blessed."

"You've been around so long, I don't think you'll ever die."

"I'm not a spring chicken anymore."

"I wish you wouldn't talk about it." Life without her sermons, phone calls, warnings to be careful; that life wouldn't be mine.

"Watcha cookin'?" I don't know why I bother to ask; she always cooked some chicken and dumplings — my mom's favorite.

I did not care for salted dough balls.

The table, too, was as I expected — orange and red tablecloth, bread & butter pickles, cornbread cooling in an iron skillet, glasses filled with chilled lemonade; bowl of potato salad, green onions, and kettle of greasy dumplings. And The Prayer.

"Dear Heavenly Father,

We come before you with bowed heads and humble hearts to give you thanks, praise, honor and glory for life itself.

We ask for your blessing upon this food for the nourishment of our bodies.

We thank you for this rare chance to come before you as family and to share in your blessings.

We love you and praise your name, Jehovah.

In the name of your Son,  
 Jesus Christ, The Great Ransomer,  
 Amen."

She had that prayer down to a science; not a word ever varied. So much for telling a six-year-old great-granddaughter that prayers should come from the heart and not the head. When I had tried that, silence came from my heart; words came from my head.

Twelve years later, I had my evening prayer down to a science, as well:

"Jehovah God the Almighty,

I thank you for a bed to sleep in, food to eat and a roof over my head.

I thank you for my mother and father, my sisters and brother,  
 Grandma, all my friends, all the people on earth and *all* living things.

I beg and ask for your forgiveness for all my sins, and I ask you to help me make fewer mistakes in the future.

I pray that you will protect us through another night and day, and help us to have a good day tomorrow.

I love you dear God.

In the name of your Son,  
 Jesus Christ,  
 Amen."

*She sang loudly in church.*

*Although She always hummed or sang softly around the house, Grandma enjoyed singing in church. It was her way of pleasing the Lord.*

*"If God hadn't wanted people to sing," She would say, "He wouldn't have given us lungs."*

*She sang at home to practice for Sunday. When the time came to open the hymnals, She was the first to "rise in song."*

*Every Sunday, I patiently waited to hear our song. The congregation didn't sing it very often — maybe, only once or twice a year. But, when they did, I almost beat Grandma standing up.*

*She sang loudly in church, and some of the brothers and sisters would turn and look.*

*As I grew older, I noticed the looks when Grandma began to sing. Little kids would point; some would giggle. She just kept right on singing.*

*I was embarrassed; she seemed unafraid.*

*One of the elders even asked Sister Sally to sing more quietly.*

*She sang loudly in church after that, but I almost whispered the words.*

When lame ones leap just like the heart,  
 When loved ones ne - ver have to part —

Grandma sat quietly pulling boiled shreds of leg meat, wing meat and

thigh meat off the chicken's scrawny bones. Afterwards, she licked the grease from her fingertips.

"The potato salad and cornbread were delicious. You haven't lost your touch."

I managed to choke three balls down and eat a lot of cornbread smothered in chicken juice. Not as bad as I expected.

"Don't you dare wash up. It gives me something to do. Just get on home now before it gets dark." Grandma had visions of me being raped and mutilated as soon as the sun edged over the horizon. She would call Mom twice before I had time to get home.

"I'll call before I go back to school."

"Love ya. Remember, 'Honor thy father and mother and your days shall be prolonged upon earth.'"

"Love you, too."

I bent to kiss her powdered cheek before locking the door. It shut with a satisfying "click." I worried about her accidentally leaving the door unlocked or forgetting to close the sliding-glass door.

She waved from the window as my car pulled away.

*I couldn't play the radio in the car.*

*According to Grandma, the songs they played on the radio were "heathen music." She didn't even approve of Mom's favorite Country and Western songs.*

*She would reach across me and turn it off, no matter what song or program was playing. She preferred to sit in silence or to talk to Mom about the people passing cars.*

*I couldn't play the radio in the car, but I usually fell asleep to her soft humming.*

Such blessed times you'll realize

If you keep your eyes on the prize.

*I sang to the car radio.*

*When I got my driver's license, I would spend hours just driving through the country, alone.*

*The car seemed to vibrate with the drum beat. My ears would ache, but my toes and fingers would bounce along with the rhythm.*

*I sang to the car radio, because no one could hear me.*

*At stop lights, I would look at the people next to me and keep right on singing. There was a sense of freedom in singing, even though they couldn't hear me.*

*I held nothing back. My voice would ricochet from window to window, trying to get out.*

*I sang to the car radio, when I was alone.*

When tongues of dumb ones speak a gain,

When old ones will be young a - gain,

A professor found me in the library one week later. A family emergency, he said. I needed to go to the emergency room at Methodist Hospital. No more information.

Mom was sitting in a hard, rubber waiting room chair. Mascara ran down her face in a muddy stream.

"She's all I have besides you kids. She's all I have."

Grandma.

"She raised me when no one else would. She's all I have." That confirms it. Grandma had taken Mom in after her parents were divorced and raised her like her own child, instead of her granddaughter.

Near hysterics, Mom could tell me nothing, except that she was sorry for getting aggravated; sorry for being impatient, sorry for calling only twice a day; Grandma should never have moved out; she was all alone when it happened, all alone.

She had moved out of our house after seven years, because of the arguments and tension she caused between my parents. It was her own decision, though; Mom had not pushed her out.

"What's wrong? Where is she? Can I see her?"

Mom, still mumbling under her breath and rocking back and forth, motioned toward a nurse going through doors marked "Personnel Only."

*She didn't know the words.*

*Mom whispered in church. She either whispered or mouthed the words to every hymn.*

*Even standing right next to her, I've never heard her sing.*

*She didn't know the words, she said, even though she'd been going to the same church for over ten years.*

*Mom even mouthed the words to "Keep Your Eyes on the Prize," without looking at the hymnal.*

*Sometimes she would hum.*

*She said she didn't know the words, and I wondered why.*

When earth will yield her rich in - crease

And all good things will nev - er cease.

*Mom told me she couldn't sing.*

*When she was seven, she had to stand up in front of her second-grade class and sing the National Anthem. She began, "My country 'tis of thee," but that's as far as she got.*

*The rest of the class laughed; she went home to Grandma in tears.*

*Although Grandma said it didn't matter what the other kids thought, it mattered.*

*Mom told me she couldn't sing, when I asked her why she never joined us —*

*why she rarely even hummed.*

*I was only six when she told me her story, but I remember the tears in her eyes. Her voice broke twice, and she hugged me tight.*

*Mom told me she couldn't sing, and I felt sorry for the joy she missed.*

When songs of chil - dren fill the air,  
When joy and peace are ev - 'ry-where,

Grandma was lying on an elevated examining table. White lights glared off her white hospital gown and white cheeks, showing the fat veins running through her forehead. A red beep sounded from the machine behind her head.

Breath wheezed through her lips, causing her body to jerk in spasms with the effort.

A stroke.

Gray hair so thin it barely covered her scalp had escaped from the bun she always wore. No lipstick, even the powder was gone.

My hands shook as I straightened her hair. The Alberto VO5 she always said I should use, made the strands easy to replace. I wiped the grease on my jeans, but my fingers remained oily for hours.

Curled up like that she looked like a bundle of discarded rags. Her body only covered about half the table; her toes didn't even reach the edge.

She was cold. Her fingertips were turning blue.

Behind the curtain, a man screamed in pain. I was thankful she was unconscious.

I kissed her forehead and whispered, "I love you. Good-bye, Grandma."  
I was afraid to wait to say my good-byes.

*I didn't know the words.*

*I went on a church hayride with my friends, and enjoyed listening to them sing. They sang "Jesus Loves Me," and "I've Been Redeemed."*

*Each person led a verse, most of which were used over and over again. Every person took a turn, except me. I was afraid to sing religious songs that were not in our hymnal.*

*I didn't know the words, because I had never heard the songs before. I learned by repetition.*

*"I've been redeemed (I've been redeemed)*

*By the blood of the land (By the blood of the land)*

*I've been redeemed (I've been redeemed)*

*By the blood of the laaaaaand.*

*I've been redeemed by the blood of the land,*

*Filled with the Holy Ghost I am*

*All my sins are washed away. I've been redeemed.*

*(I've been redeemed.)"*

*I didn't even know what the Holy Ghost was, and I'd never been baptized.*

*I didn't know the words, because they meant nothing to me.*

Then, too, you'll see the dead a - rise,  
If you keep your eyes on the prize!

An ambulance took her back to our local hospital. Methodist could do nothing for her; she was going to die.

The vigil began.

The Witnesses were there en masse. They hardly left any room near the bed for family to squeeze through.

Mom was right; they had done a lot for her through the years. But, it seemed to me that they had taken away some of the joy, as well.

I remembered not having a Christmas tree when Grandma lived with us. She was afraid a Witness would drive by and see her celebrating a holiday. That was cause enough to be disfellowshipped.

I never believed in Santa Claus, because for us Santa could never exist.

Mom bought presents and made sure we got them near Christmas, because she didn't want us to be different from the other kids. I felt different every time the holiday season rolled around. Strangely enough, at that time of year, I had more in common with the Jewish students than any others. The Witnesses were not very tolerant of Jews.

Carolers were ignored at our house. Even after years of not going to church with Grandma, I still don't know the words to most Christmas carols. I was, however, one of the few nine-year-olds to know every verse of *Rudolph the Red-Nose Reindeer*, *Frosty the Snowman* and the Who's carol from the *Grinch Who Stole Christmas*.

I watched a lot of television during the holidays.

I remember going door-to-door with them, trying to sell literature for a dime.

"I'd like to talk to you about Jehovah God the Almighty."

"Sorry, not today."

"You people have a hell-of-a-sense of timing."

"Get the fuck out of my yard."

For hours on end, Grandma (in her 80's) would walk up and down the streets, putting in her time "witnessing." Her feet and back would ache, but she kept right on, door-to-door.

The elders said age shouldn't interfere with a witness' work. The elders were only in their 40's.

Now, here they were trying to ease the sister's death, when they had done so little to ease her life.

*I spent hours rubbing her feet.*

*The odor of old feet and wrinkled flesh filled the small room where my Grandma slept.*

*The smell of wrinkled flesh penetrated the walls of Grandma's room; just as the smell of newborn skin fills a nursery. (Enter either with your eyes closed and*

*you immediately know where you are.)*

*I'm not talking about the sickroom smell of a person slowly dying. And I'm not talking about the smell of lilac powder or violet perfume. Hers was the smell of tired skin and feet that had worked hard for eighty years.*

*I spent hours rubbing her feet — pulling off dead skin, buffing away callouses and clipping away corns.*

*At these times, the smell of old flesh burned the inside of my nose, like the smell of a baby's urine mixed with talcum powder burns.*

*It wasn't unpleasant; I enjoyed it. I was only seven.*

*I spent hours rubbing her feet while She sat back in her rocker, softly singing.*

When wolves and lambs will feed as one,  
When bears and calves bask in the sun,

We spent hours holding her hand, waiting in the corridor for news. There was no hope.

We waited.

"You'd better come in the room now. I think it's time."

Relief swept through me, followed quickly by guilt. I didn't want her to die, but I wanted it to be over with.

Her breath was more ragged and less frequent than it had been in the emergency room. Not even death was going to be easy for her.

"Grandma, please don't leave us. Don't go," my sister was begging desperately, hoping to reach through.

"We're here Mom, we're all here."

Grandma cried out, once, and settled into what appeared to be a natural sleep. The doctor said she had stabilized some; this time it has been a false alarm.

We (great-grandchildren and great-great-grandchildren) filed back into the corridor, glancing tiredly at the red, foam-rubber chairs. Nothing to do but wait.

Dad went for food and coffee; Mom clung desperately to Grandma's hand. Her tears were dried up for now; she struggled for control.

"I'm here, Mom. I won't leave you alone; I know you don't like to be alone," Mom muttered over and over.

Mom hummed quietly to soothe the sleep of the dying. I didn't hear her until I bent over to offer her a Coke. No one else heard her, including the Brothers sitting on the other side of the bed.

The lights in the hall were so bright, I was beginning to see spots. Even my eyelashes hurt near the base. Rubbing did not help.

I looked horrible, as did the rest of the family. The Witnesses just kept coming in, though, as fresh as daisies. They had it all worked out in shifts. Every time I went to the bathroom, I stumbled across one of them repairing her make-up or getting off the nearby elevator.



I had been at the hospital 12 hours, so far.

One of them even tried to sell me literature down in the lobby. I guess she didn't realize who I was.

I borrowed a hymnal from one of the brothers. I took comfort in the words from familiar hymns, and read them aloud to Grandma.

The verse on the title page read, "Keep getting filled with the spirit, speaking to yourselves with psalms and praises to God and spiritual songs, singing and accompanying yourselves with music in your hearts to Jehovah."

— Ephesians 5: 18,19.

That described Grandma; she had music in her heart.

*The music was trapped in me.*

*I loved choir, and was never embarrassed to "sing out," until I found out I couldn't sing.*

*I had trouble singing the scale, and I had trouble singing alone, and I had trouble hitting the high notes.*

*The music was trapped in me, because I was unable to sing it the way it should be sung.*

*My choral director explained that I was flat most of the time.*

*After years of singing, I was now embarrassed to sing above a whisper.*

*I remember Mom's story, a realize that my inability to carry a tune was inherited.*

*Even to me, Grandma was no longer the best singer in the world; she was sharp most of the time.*

*The music was trapped in me, as it was trapped in Mom.*

A mere young boy will lead them all,  
And they will heed his child - ish call

This time it wasn't a false alarm.

She passed quietly, her breath softly humming through her lips; one tear accompanying another, trailing from the corner of her eye.

I don't know if she was conscious of anything before she died, but I hope she heard everyone else say, "Good-bye."

I hope she heard me tell her I'd see her in the new kingdom—the prize promised by God. I hope she heard Mom say how grateful she was and how much she'd miss her, despite the arguments.

"I am the resurrection and the life. The man who believes in me will live even though he dies, and every living person who puts his faith in me shall have ever lasting life."

"For the living are conscious that they will die; but as for the dead, they are conscious of nothing at all."

Ecclesiastes 9:5.

I remembered that one. She told me to take comfort in it. Cold comfort.

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*When She died, I sang.*

*The stroke was almost painless, they said. At 85, her time had come. She had lived a long life.*

*I missed her.*

*The brother who would be saying the final words at the funeral asked the family if we wanted anything special. I requested our song; just like he was a disc jockey asking for a dedication.*

*When She died, I sang.*

*Most of the church came to the funeral. They said how sorry they were. Sister Sally would be missed. She was a great contribution to the congregation.*

*Brother Williams read from the Bible, said good-bye and asked the congregation to join him in singing, "Keep Your Eyes on the Prize."*

*Mom sat quietly throughout the song.*

*As they sang, I slowly stood up. Through my tears, and despite the watching congregation, I sang our song one last time.*

*I did not whisper.*

*When She died, I sang.*

*When tears be - long to yes - ter - day,  
When fears and pain have passed a - way,  
You'll see how God these things sup - plies,  
If you keep your eyes on the prize!*