



Glorietta Bay Park, June 12

## Remarks for Mom's 90th Birthday

*Elaine Elliott*

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On Sunday Chuck led us in a reflection on “**God’s Faithfulness through the Generations**” and we heard longer versions of some of the things I refer to here. There are several repetitions in scripture of God’s promise: “**I lavish unfailing love for a thousand generations on those who love me and obey my commands.**” We are all benefitting from Mom and Dad’s love and obedience for God. We all have a choice to continue this legacy for our generation and those to come.

Sharon asked me to prepare a speech for this occasion, and so, Mom, this is my version of your life.

As we celebrate Mom’s 90th birthday, it must be said that she has lived an unconventional life for a California girl! Born in Burbank in 1929, she was raised in a Christian home with two older siblings, Clint and Ellen. Their home when I visited as a child seemed tiny by our standards today, but had a big backyard, porch and front yard. Her Dad was a drapery salesman and her Mom took care of her own invalided mother. They were fixtures in their local Christian and Missionary Alliance Church.

Mom has said that she aspired to be an opera singer, and both she and her sister were musically talented. Mom was a very good singer, and through the years she has sung many solos, and has composed music as well. But her life took a turn when she was 18 and went to the Forest Home Conference Center. For the first time her faith in Christ became personal, not just something her parents believed and taught. She decided to change her plans and go to Bible College, and through some last minute string-pulling on the part of an administrator, she managed to get into Simpson Bible College that fall.

Dad was also at Simpson which was in Seattle, Washington, along with his cousin. From their devout upbringings, they were both inclined toward missions, and Dad became the leader of the school's mission programming. Mom and Dad became close not only because it was a relatively small school, but also through being in a traveling choir together, and through some doubles ping-pong games. Eventually engaged, they thought about missions together. Dad was electrified by the movie "*Oh for a 1,000 tongues*" that presented the emerging work of Bible translation, and felt strongly "that is what I should do!" So they began moving in that direction.

They married in southern California, and I was born during their last year at Simpson. After graduation they had a pastorate in Ashland, Oregon, and then joined Wycliffe after Bev was born. While studying linguistics to be able to learn an unwritten language, they heard a presentation about the Mixtec people from the widow of a missionary who had worked in Oaxaca. Separately they thought, "I think that we are supposed to go there" and shared that inner tug with one another.

I've always thought that this sense of a clear calling and vocation helped Mom live cheerfully in what was actually a rather strange and lonely situation in a small village. A very gregarious person (in fact, I caught her sharing her life story with another stranger the other day!) a performer, well-educated, and an American, it could not have been easy to live cross-culturally among people who were extremely poor and marginalized. Their corn farms could not support them for the whole year, so men would have to leave the community in search of work. Mom and Dad's initial training included going to Jungle Camp to learn to build a simple house, learn to cook with limited supplies, hike, and manage basic medical needs. I don't remember, of course, but there is a picture of me with my bib and silverware tied onto my back since I wanted to carry something too! In the village they rented and then built a house made of *adobes*.

By the time they began work in Peñoles, she had the confidence to essentially become the village nurse. She not only learned enough Mixtec to get along in conversation, it enabled her to make reading primers and teach reading. She typed all

the translation work Dad was doing—remember all that white out and having to start over?—and through the years made the transition from typewriters to computers. She also made delicious bread and cinnamon rolls every week—a great childhood memory—canned her own food since there was no market in the village, had a garden, and lived simply with latrine, cement floors, water heated on a gas stove and cooled in clay pots for drinking, a tin bathtub, and those old-fashioned irons you see in antique shops.

Sharon and Kelly were both born in Mexico, and as we grew up Mom took on home- schooling all of us. Her method made us very efficient since we could go and play in the river while our housekeeper washed clothes as soon as we were done with our assignments. We had family game night, favorite books we read, roasted marshmallows in the fireplace, had a cat and a dog, and listened to Bible stories at least on Sundays! For Christmas we would cut a tree from the woods and decorate with stars made from tin-can lids. For Easter we would decorate eggs and go on a picnic. And, of course, we flew in and out of the village on the airplane since the logging road was so dangerous we had nearly lost our lives going off the road.

Years later, as mothers ourselves, we went back to the village and were quite horrified to realize everything she did. Part of the issue is that we all have more memories of her reading and being relaxing than doing any work—she never seemed stressed out by our “little house on the prairie” lifestyle. Nor by the many many trips we made.

Dad got his Ph.D. in linguistics in Indiana, and that is when Chuck was born. Both Mom and Dad taught in the linguistics training schools (SIL) every summer for many many years and she usually taught phonetics. We usually camped out going to and from North Dakota (and that was considered our vacation—terrible!) Some trips involved visiting grandparents and cousins in Tucson and California. It was strange to be the poor relatives there and then go back to Mexico where we were the rich Americans!

I have often thought that our parents did not really do much in the way of pushing their faith on us. We observed what they did, saw their service to others, went to church with them, and somehow all absorbed that there was a real spiritual world behind all of this. All five of us kids ended up making very personal faith commitments, and I think in every case we made that decision with someone other than our parents. But the results have been long-lasting, and coming to that faith was helped by the consistency between what our parents said they believed and what they did.

As we all went off to high school and college, Mom and Dad finished the Peñoles New Testament, as well as an adaptation to another variant of Mixtec. Dad became director of both the Mexico Branch and of the North Dakota training school, and for a

while was on the board of the international Wycliffe organization. In all those roles he had a lot of demands, and Mom's friendliness and sociability were always a great asset. The richness of Mom's friendships with people from throughout these experiences is impressive, and she knows many people who deserve to have books written about them, as well as many people who actually have had the books written about them.

They were able to travel to many places because of the international meetings. So she passed on to us an enjoyment of travel and cross-cultural experiences. Other things Mom passed on to us were her love of music, her love of museums, and her enthusiasm for anthropology. She got her MA degree in Anthro from the University of Arizona while I was in high school, and she still has an exemplary curiosity about other cultures to this day.

Eventually they moved to Tucson to care for my Dad's parents in their last years, and they remained there because of my Dad's declining health. He had MS from the time Bev married, but it did not become acute until the final years of his life, and Mom served as a patient caregiver for him. Dad died in 2009, having lived an admirable life. Mom's ability to find her way as a cheerful and giving widow has been an inspiring example.

I often think she exemplifies the scripture that says if you give up lands and family for the sake of the gospel, you will get 100-fold back. Not only did she gain a large family with five in-laws, 17 grandchildren and 7 spouses so far, and, soon to be, 8 great-grandchildren, she stayed connected with her extended Wycliffe family, as well as other relatives and friends from church. She also ended up with lots of land! The inheritance from Dad's parents as well as investments she and Dad made have definitely changed her from poor missionary to successful family banker!

Each of us kids have had our unique adult struggles, and Mom and Dad always could be relied on to try to find practical ways of helping us. One of the most heart-breaking struggles was Bev's ups and downs with cancer. She had nearly died when 18 after having convulsions and being in a coma but made a miraculous recovery. With cancer she had numerous recoveries as well, and Mom was by her side at many critical moments. When she died, Mom said it just felt wrong that a child should die before her parents. But in all of these things, she faced challenges, griefs and losses with prayer, and served as an example of faith when life is hard.

After being widowed, another widower from Wycliffe, Dr. Joe Grimes, got her involved in completing the Hawai'i Pidgin Bible. She threw herself into the project enthusiastically, and now that it is completed, plans to go to Hawai'i when it is presented on all five islands. Her latest project has been a coloring book that covers the whole Old Testament with captions in Hawai'i Pidgin. Coming to live with Sharon

and Todd this last year has done good things for her to make sure her health remains strong.

I'm glad I'm having this chance to praise Mom as it fits so well the Proverbs 31 scripture which says "her children stand and bless her." In so many ways she literally pulled off being like the woman described in that chapter, and what I will say next makes the most sense if you see that I am applying each of the verses in that chapter to her.

She was a supportive and dependable wife who always helped Dad. She actually learned how to spin wool because that is something the older ladies in the village knew how to do. She HAD to bring her food from afar since there was not much available in the village. She had to get up early because the pilot from Mitla needed a daily weather report by radio. She planned the work our housekeeper Teresa did each day. Through the years she helped select and purchase various properties. And, when possible, she had a garden. She worked hard on teaching, typing, and taking care of us.

She HAD to look for bargains since missionary incomes can be pretty dismal. She definitely extended a helping hand to the poor with gifts, loans, and medical care. We all had decent clothes, often from the missionary barrel or sewn by her. She even sewed my wedding dress and all of the bridesmaids' dresses. I literally still have a quilt that was on her bed in the village. She manages to always look elegant even when bragging that what she is wearing cost practically nothing at a second-hand shop.

Dad was in council meetings with other leaders in Mexico, North Dakota, and in Wycliffe International. She taught us patiently and made sure we did our share of chores so it was hard to get away with being lazy. Most of us can recall some corrective critical comments, but overall our memories are of a calm person who did not easily get upset and was cheerful and optimistic about life, and gave us a foundation of hopefulness.

As you will see from the pictures, she was a beautiful young woman, and she has managed to remain a charming and attractive older woman who picks up compliments from strangers on a regular basis!

As Proverbs 31 says at the end: **"a woman who fears the Lord will be greatly praised. Reward her for all she has done. Let her deeds publicly declare her praise."**

It is lovely to have this time for us to celebrate you, Mom, and express our appreciation for all you have done for each one of us, the example of your faith, life, generosity, service, and love for your family.

We love you, Mom!