

## WATCHING DIANNE WATCH AL

*Shauna Samuelson*

Almost twenty years ago we moved to Rexburg. One of our first home teachers was a kind gentleman, Al Forbis. Getting to know Al and his wife Dianne, we could see that they were not your run-of-the-mill Mormons. In fact, they weren't run-of-the-mill at anything. First of all, they were artists. Al took his job at Ricks College, teaching classes in interior design, very seriously. Dianne was employed by Artco, designing wedding catalogues, working on both the visual design and the text. She also taught an occasional class in English at Ricks. Al had a great collection of classical CDs and audio equipment to indulge his love of music. Dianne infused everything she touched with creativity. You have never seen a class taught like Dianne can do it. Many teachers use visual aids: with Dianne, the visual becomes a sure pathway to memory; always significant, her visual illustrations both enlighten and engage.

Dianne is not a warm-fuzzy. When the "Curmudgeons Club" was formed, she and I were obviously qualified for membership. (My husband Scott tends to be too nice, and Al had too great a desire to make people happy.) Both Al and Dianne, however, really went out of their way to home-teach in the extra-mile fashion. Neither my kids nor I will ever forget the day they invited us over for Family Home Evening, when we decorated gingerbread men. Bowls of every kind of candy sat on the table, waiting for our decisions (and ingestion.) Another time, early in our relationship with them, Al and Dianne invited Scott and me to go to West Yellowstone to Playmill Theater with them. *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* was playing. I started the evening in a ferociously nasty mood. Three minutes into the "oleos" I had abandoned the sulks and was laughing immoderately. I have always been grateful to them for that memory.

Many other generousities came our way from the Forbises. Scott has read and learned from the magazine *Fine Woodworking* for years, a gift from Al and Dianne. Many toothsome dinners and desserts came our way from the Forbis household. Once, when Scott was out of town, I received a cake and a note, printed in Dianne's unusually pleasing script, saying, "Have a good day." I really needed that. What great friends.

Dianne and Al have three children, daughters, all of unique personality and ability: Holly with her love of drama and nurturing; Marin with her amazing artistic creativity; and Chaleen with her incredible memory and tenacious loyalty: these girls made the Forbis experience even more interesting.

One of Dianne's outstanding characteristics is her creative intelligence. It's not just her visuals that make her classes interesting: she always addresses

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a subject from an unusual angle. For instance, she is one of the teachers of the Gospel Doctrine lessons in her current ward in Utah, where she is living with her daughter Holly. She wrote an e-mail to me, saying, “Right now I’m reading *A Brief History of Time* by Stephen Hawking. How will I relate that to the lesson on Creation, which I’ll be teaching in gospel doctrine? Should be fun.” And then, in response to a question from me, “Yes, I did make reference in the ‘Creation’ lesson to Stephen Hawking and his book. Lesson came out okay.” From my experiences in Dianne’s classes, I assume that is modest understatement.

When Chaleen was born, with a rare condition called tuberous sclerosis, the doctors told Dianne that Chaleen would probably never walk and certainly never develop much ability with talking. Dianne, being the stubborn, resistant person that she is, has proved those doctors wrong, really wrong. During the time we were together in the ward, Chaleen was constantly called on to read aloud in the scriptures because of her competency in reading. (She has read the Bible so many times that she is the one called upon to teach the resurrection to the rest of us!) One of the first comments I heard made about Chaleen in the ward was, if you want to know any fact about sports, ask Chaleen. MVP for the Dolphins in 1970? Ask Chaleen. Who hit the winning home run in the World Series in whatever year? Ask Chaleen. And watch her throw the basketball! Her form isn’t traditional, but she makes most of the shots. Chaleen has become a good angel for Dianne (and others who know her.) Her faith is constant, and her prayers are efficacious. Dianne and Chaleen have read together, in addition to myriad times they have read the scriptures, all of the classics, from the Shakespeare plays, to *Moby Dick*, to *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. I’m not sure how much Chaleen enjoyed *Ulysses*, but it is stored in her brain somewhere.

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A few years ago Al’s student evaluations started to indicate some problems. His students seemed to think that he got off the subject a bit. We were all indignant at the students: critical little twerps. Some months later, however, Dianne became aware that Al’s concentration was less than it had been. Well, we are all getting older, right? But eventually they arranged an appointment with the family doctor, which led to other appointments, which led to the knowledge that devastated us all: Al had Alzheimer’s. Dianne read up on the subject, of course; but no understanding or knowledge of what is to come can prepare a person for the awful disintegration of personality that is the outcome of Alzheimer’s. Soon Al was working in the library instead of his teaching job. Eventually, he retired from Ricks College, with a farewell party at the college attended by all his friends. It was awful getting him ready: he had developed likes and dislikes in clothing which were unacceptable. He almost got lost on

his way there. I remember at the party how he greeted people, in his old, enthusiastic way; but I am not sure he knew who we were.

Some of Al's episodes were almost amusing: the unknown lady in WalMart whom he greeted as an old, valuable friend has probably not recovered from it yet. But there were few things to laugh about. As Al got worse, his "primary caregiver," Dianne, became more and more distracted and frustrated. She is by nature a teacher, so she continually tried to fix knowledge in his mind. It was useless. He couldn't remember for even minutes, and would ask the same question or make the same complaint over and over again. He became obsessive in his actions, wanting to wear strange things, going through Dianne's drawers, setting the table with inappropriate and multiple utensils and dishes. Dianne's patience would slip, and then guilt would be added to the overwhelming horror of the situation. Al eventually spent some of his day with his daughter Holly, who lived a few blocks away. I don't know how Holly did it. At the time she was caring for five very active children, most of whom were not yet in school. She at least didn't feel the anger at the illness destroying Al that Dianne felt.

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It was an awful time. Eventually, it became too much for Dianne, in spite of the help she received from her daughters, friends, and the ward. Then came the search for a suitable care facility. A number of places in Rexburg were tried and proved unsuccessful. Al wandered away from a nursing home in Rexburg one day. There was a frantic search by all of his friends, until he was discovered wandering around the Snow building on campus. He had gone back to one of his homes. Scott and I went to pick him up: he was confused and confusing. He had lost his speech by then and didn't make any sense, although he sounded like he was delivering sentences. Scott put his arm around him and led him to the car, trying to comfort him. Al was like a child. It was bitter to leave him at the nursing home: he didn't want to stay. I felt like a traitor. Eventually an Alzheimer's facility in Idaho Falls, where the workers were sympathetic and the situation secure, proved the answer.

Maybe the most frightening part of the whole downward spiral was Al's loss of language. He had more and more trouble following conversations, and then he got so his own sentences indicated that he wasn't understanding us. We couldn't understand him much of the time: the words were English, but they weren't put together in a way that made sense. When the words themselves jumbled, it was horrible. His humanity was disappearing in spite of all that we could do to hold him and lessons in language and logic from his wife. Dianne became more and more stressed. At the same time, she was having to handle life-threatening health problems in Chaleen. Everything almost overwhelmed her, and I don't know to this day how she managed to write in her journal during

this period. Later the journal was there to make up part of the book that came from this inferno.

The book itself is a miracle. In the way people have of wanting to share experience and perhaps help others through the same problems, Dianne's impulse was to verbalize her husband's loss of verbal ability. The book, *With Words that Once Were His*, is a unique combination. After Al was gone from home, when Dianne recovered some of her psychic energy, she started writing poems about the months she had just lived through. She had realized, during the years she had searched for information on Alzheimer's, how little was written about the experience of losing a loved one to mental disintegration; and it occurred to her that perhaps her poems would fill a void for people trying to understand what had happened to them in this situation. Surely the loneliness of thinking yourself unique is one of the worst pains of going through a time of trial. So Dianne put together a book of her poetry, journal excerpts, and commentary. Scott and I were asked to proof-read it. I judged its effectiveness by the fact that I cried throughout my reading, as I still do, over a year later. To a much smaller extent, Scott and I had lost Al too.

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Dianne's poetry is very readable. Her use of words and sound is reminiscent of Gerald Manley Hopkins. She has a knack for taking commonplace happenstance and turning it into significant metaphor. I like the puzzle quality of some of her poetry: one must work to put the pieces together to find the whole. Although not evident in this book, her humor pervades much of her writing. Some of her poems have been published in the church's *Ensign* magazine due to her ability to give new meaning and sense to ideas and abstractions. One of Dianne's poems held a spot of honor for years in my Primary President's notebook: it gave me hope on days when children seemed not to listen.

I waft  
with gentle picture  
or a quiet testimony  
some  
tiny seeds  
of truth  
across the room.  
Does settle or sowing  
touch the child  
who sits and mopes  
or pokes and jokes?  
At least he's there  
breathing the air.  
And if I wave much good his way  
some of it might stick and stay.  
("Teaching," *Ensign*, December 1975, 65)

Read this book. I know that the idea of poetry intimidates some people, but this is not a book of poetry; it is a novel, the story of kind, gentle, eager-to-please artist-Al's decline, dragging Dianne with him, as she held tight, unwilling to let him travel alone, and unwilling to believe that she couldn't pull him back. It's not easy to read, not easy to remember Al in those last days. But it's worth it. Dianne's writing is compelling, clear in detail and process. Her language is exact; she is a wordsmith, as Al was. *With Words that Once Were His* is a tale of where life can take you, a pondering on loss, and a grasping at faith. It's worth the tears you shed, for they bring you into a common humanity, teaching a lesson that most people, we hope, will never have to live through themselves. ☺

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