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PEOPLE I HAVE KNOWN (Part 4)

I first knew **TOM WARNER** (1950 - 2015) through correspondence which began around 1986 when he was moving to Maine to pastor a church near the Canadian border. I appreciated his nonpartisan insight into Scripture and dedication to truth. I believe our exchanges, first by letters, and later by email, were meaningful to each of us. Tom was a biblical theologian; I use the term in a positive sense.



Our first time to actually meet in person came a few years later when—by this time—he had moved to Colorado and was pastoring a lovely church in Denver (Lakewood). I went by train to see him and spent a couple days. Tom and his wife Shelley, with their two children, Andy and Corina, met me at the Denver train station. Little did I know this visit would lead to numerous other times together in a variety of places, in fun times, in ministry and, yes, in sorrow, when I took part in his funeral following his untimely death in 2015.

But for the moment, a few comments about the train trip to Denver and back, may be of some general interest. As the train left Denver, there was a problem with a wheel on the dining car, which had to be uncoupled and left behind. Snacks like hotdogs and pizza would still be available in the lower level of the observation car, but no dinning car for meals.

Upon arrival at Glenwood Springs, a small pickup truck met the train with 300 boxes of Colonial Sander's Kentucky Fried Chicken dinners, including coleslaw, mashed potatoes and gravy. The small KFC fast food restaurant was nearby, just across the river from the train station. Notification would have been given ahead of time by Amtrak. But to this day I still wonder *how* that many dinners were put together and kept hot! Along with the KFC dinner, each person on the train was given a can of Dr. Pepper or Coca Cola, all compliments of Amtrak.

In crossing the Rocky Mountains, the rails follow the Colorado River for over 200 miles through a variety of deep canyons along a very scenic route. At one remote area (near Bond), the train passes a river campground where people have long “moonied” the train as it goes by. As stupid as this is, it has become a tradition, enough so that a train crew member announces it ahead of time on the intercom. When it happens, he sings lines from the classic song “Moon River.”

After leaving the glitz of Las Vegas behind, with the train now out in the wind-swept desert, a crew member announced on the intercom: “Some of you may wonder where those plastic bags at the grocery store come from. A lot of people don't know they are grown out here in the desert.” About that time the train rounded a curve and there were literally hundreds of plastic bags, caught on sagebrush and creosote bushes, blowing in the wind! He said, “Looks like there is another crop about ready to be harvested!” It was a joke, of course. No doubt there was a dump ground out that way and the wind picked up bags which got caught on the bushes.

While pastoring in Denver, Tom and his family attended a church convention in southern California. I made arrangements for him to speak twice at our church here while in this area. A couple years later I spoke at his church in Denver as part of a circle of speaking engagements in several states, including a Spring Bible Conference in Little Rock, Arkansas.

At that time we owned a motor home. As we headed east from Denver across Nebraska, an unexpected snowstorm swept in upon us. Having had little experience driving in snow, as the snow on the freeway quickly became deeper and deeper, coming to an exit was a welcome relief. Everyone was pulling off including huge trucks. We were glad we had plenty of blankets and did what we could to protect ourselves, and our two dogs, from the bitter cold.

That little town was **Hershey**, Nebraska. We always remembered Hershey, not just as the name of a candy bar, but because of a very cold, but safe night we spent there.

Later, when Tom was called to pastor a church in San Diego, this put us closer together geographically. There are fond memories of special times together that included Joshua Tree National Park, the Riverside County Date Festival at Indio, the San Diego Zoo, etc.

The church Tom pastored in San Diego (where he also gave me the opportunity to speak), was located fairly close to the famous San Diego Zoo. One day, Arlene and I, along with Tom, Shelley, and their two children, went to the zoo and stayed for a special program that evening. The San Diego Zoo draws as many as four million visitors a year and is rated as the most visited zoo in the United States. So there were a lot of cars in the parking lot. When we came out it was dark, things looked different, and I did not remember where I parked the car! Warner's son, Andy, said: "We can wait until everyone else leaves, then we will know where the car is!" Great logic coming from a boy—something we older folks had not thought about! Fortunately we soon located the car.

Tom once told me a "tragedy-to-triumph" story about a man who was shipwrecked on an island. After being stranded there for a long time, he built a shelter for what few goods he had left. But then this caught fire and burned down. It looked like things had gone from bad to worse. But because of this, a ship captain saw the smoke and came to his rescue!

This reminded me of a joke a pastor told me in Arizona many years ago. Two American Indians who lived on remote reservations would send smoke signals back and forth to each other. The one sent a smoke signal and waited for a response. (This was back when the government was testing the Atomic Bomb in the Nevada desert.) About that time a huge mushroom-shaped cloud of smoke ascended high in the air. When the other Indian saw this above the distant hill, he sent back his smoke signal response: "I didn't mind what you said, but *you don't have to raise your voice!*"

Some "stories" are simply made up stories to make a point or for humor. But the true story I am about to share—one that Tom told me—is much more serious. Tom and a college friend both worked at a 24-hour convenience store. For reasons like needing to study for examines, they would sometime switch hours. As I recall, this was the reason Tom asked his friend to work the nightshift in his place. That night someone came in to rob the store and in the process his friend was *murdered!*

Tom, upon hearing what happened, knew he did not want to work there any longer and went that next morning to resign. As he arrived, they were cleaning up the blood from the brutal murder. Had Tom been there, as scheduled, it would have been *him!*

Isn't that a picture of Redemption, of the substitutionary death of Jesus Christ for *us* (Rom. 5:8)! He took *our* place. The words of an old gospel song come to mind:

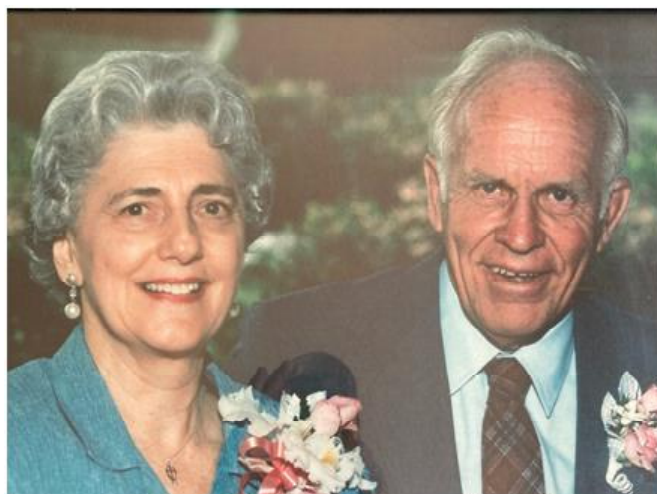
Jesus signed my pardon, this I surely know,
Took my place at Calvary, now I won't have to go,
 All my life I'll give to him, **he gave his for me,**
 When he signed my pardon, there at Calvary.

Eventually Tom and his family moved back to his hometown of Boise, Idaho. Prior to his death in 2015, he struggled with cancer, which at times seemed to be improving, but which finally took his life. Tom believed in God's power to heal. But if healing did not come, he told me he did not fear death. His concern was that he would no longer be here for family members,

especially his two small grandchildren Faith and Zachary. I prayed he would be healed. But it is appointed unto man once to die, and even men of great faith, like Elisha—who became sick and died (2 Kings 13:14)—have kept that appointment.

When word came of Tom's passing, we drove to Boise, Idaho, where we stayed with another long-time friend and servant of the Lord, **CURT VIESELMAYER**.

It was an honor to take part—along with Tom's brother Kevin (also a minister), from Albuquerque, and some others—in the funeral service. The chapel that seated 200 was filled and others were standing. I was asked to conduct a smaller service the next day at the Boise River, mainly for family members, *at the same spot where Tom had been baptized as a young man*. As part of that service, Tom's wife Shelly and daughter Corina waded into the water and emptied his ashes. That was an emotional moment indeed!



Alta Davis (1924 - 2020) Roy Davis (1923 - 2011)

This next story goes back about 20 years, as of this writing. For a few weeks when the Community Church in Thousand Palms (about 12 miles from Palm Springs) was between pastors, I was asked to fill in. This was when I met **ROY AND ALTA DAVIS** who were attending this church at the time. After service some of us went out to eat at the nearby Denny's restaurant. I had mentioned something about growing up in Riverside. Roy asked me, "Did you ever know W. W. Catherwood who pastored in Riverside for many years?"

Did I know him? Yes, indeed! **WILLIAM WILSON CATHERWOOD** (1878 - 1959) had been my mother's pastor for a number of years. He was the one who performed the wedding ceremony for my parents, Otto and Florence Woodrow, when they married. When I was nine years old, he conducted a special service for our young people's Sunday School class and gave an invitation to receive Christ. I was among those who accepted that invitation and a short time later he was the one by whom I was baptized.

Then Roy told me *his* story. In 1933 Catherwood held revival meetings in Yucaipa. Following a message aimed at youth, four boys stepped out for salvation and shortly after that followed the Lord in baptism. One of the boys was Bill Murray who

went on to be a lifetime missionary. Two others were Roy and his twin brother. So Roy and I discovered *we had the same spiritual father!*

W. W. Catherwood was born in Ireland, but at age 17 came to the United States for ministerial training at Mt. Herman School founded by Dwight L. Moody and later attended the Moody Bible Institute in Chicago. He was a pall-bearer at Moody's funeral in 1899. While I do not know this for sure, it is very possible that Catherwood's conversion came about because of Moody's ministry. If so, Roy Davis and I would be *spiritual grandsons of the famous preacher D. L. Moody!*



Back in the 1930s, Roy's parents owned the Davis Market, a small grocery store in Yucaipa, California. Two twin brothers, Leo and Cleo Stater, worked at the store. Roy's father offered to sell them the store for a \$600 down payment. It was depression time. In 1936, that store became the first Stater Brothers Market. It was a struggle at first, at one point they nearly gave up, but in time it blossomed into a great success story. Anyone living in southern California knows about the Stater Brothers Markets which now number over **170**, with **18,000** employees. In the 50s and 60s my father worked for Stater Brothers as a meat cutter, until his unexpected death in 1969.

Alta (Davis) was born and raised in Kansas. She received Christ at a young age. In time a doctor recommended that she move to an area with a milder winter climate. She moved to Palm Springs in 1945 where she was involved in church activities and worked at a bank. As a young woman she also had some seasonal jobs in resort areas, including Yosemite and Death Valley. In 1957 Roy and Alta were married in Palm Springs. Fifty years later Arlene and I were pleased, along with a large crowd of people, to celebrate their anniversary.

W. W. Catherwood pastored in Riverside from 1924 to 1950. Though he was blessed by many spiritual achievements, he was also acquainted with grief. In 1947 his daughter Evelyn died and five days after this his wife died also, resulting from a car accident. Later, while taking part in a baseball game with young people at a church camp, he broke a hip. For a while he preached from a wheelchair. His retirement soon followed.

Eventually he moved to Palm Springs where his son Bill was a chiropractor. Though by now he was up in years, he was asked to teach the young people's class at the church attended by Roy and Alta Davis, causing their paths to cross again!

Roy and Alta never had children of their own, but over the years took in many children and young people, some troubled and neglected, providing them a home and instilling in them good values for life. I don't know if they hit a "home run" with

all of them, but for many this was definitely the case. One that comes to mind is now the pastor of a large church in British Columbia. The one I know best, a friend and neighbor, is **PHIL FRANKLIN**. Roy and Alta were like mom and dad to him from the time he was 10. He is now a grown married man with children of his own, and grandchildren.

With a grateful heart, Phil took care of a variety of things for Alta, especially after Roy's passing. He put forth a special effort to bring her in a wheelchair to the funeral service for Arlene. That was *the last time she was in church* (in this life), her passing at age 95 coming less than four months later. She was a remarkable woman of faith, sharp, and with a positive attitude about life. Only physically, toward the end, did things go downhill as she struggled with cancer.

Thinking of the scripture about giving "honor to whom honor" is due (Rom. 13:7), Roy and Alta cheerfully and faithfully supported a number of different ministries, including mine. Even after Roy's death, Alta continued to write and mail an offering check each month.

At the same time we met Roy and Alta, we met **LUCILLE STAL**, a long-time friend of theirs. We would have assumed she lived in Thousand Palms, but then we learned she lived in Palm Springs. When we asked *where*, she said her house was on a little street no one has ever heard of. Interestingly, we discovered that we were neighbors, with only four houses between our house and hers! *Small world.* Having just lost her husband (who had been a pastor when he was younger), she felt our friendship helped fill an empty place in her life. The words of a little plaque hanging on our wall were true: **EVERY END IS A NEW BEGINNING**. She began attending Arlene's Women's Bible studies on a regular basis. When she passed from this life, as was her request, Arlene conducted her funeral which was attended by many friends and family members.



Here is another "small world" story: In August 2008, using free air miles that had built up, Arlene and I flew to Seattle. While there we visited some relatives, toured the huge Boeing Airplane Assembly Plant (said to be the largest building in the world figured by volume), took the ferry to islands, etc.

One day we had planned to go to Mount Rainier, but there was a forecast for rain later in the day. Definitely not the best day to go to Mount Rainier! So we decided on the zoo instead. At lunchtime we went to the food court, ordered food, and found a table inside. (Others were at tables on an outside deck.) When the rain started, people on the outside quickly moved inside. One man with a plate of food in his hand, asked if he could join us at our table. We welcomed him, of course. He was

wearing a black cap that said “NEW ZEALAND.” I asked if he was from New Zealand and he said, “No; I actually live in California—in Palm Springs.” We told him *so did we!* Come to find out where he lived was less than a mile from our house!

On that trip, our friends **PAUL AND JOANE TILLMAN** (dear people of God) had offered to loan us a car. Paul showed me how to use the GPS—that was my first time—which proved to be very helpful. At the end of our time in the Northwest, on the day we returned the car to them, they took us to Mount St. Helens. It had rained earlier in the day and when this photo was taken a cloud obscured the summit. However, before we



left, the sky had cleared and the top of the mountain (what is left of it!) was clearly visible.

Most know about the catastrophic eruption that occurred on May 18, 1980—the most significant volcanic event in United States history—when an enormous portion of this mountain suddenly blew up.

Fifty-seven people died; 250 homes, 47 bridges, and 185 miles of highway were destroyed. A 230 square-mile area of forest was blown down or buried beneath debris. The mushroom-shaped column that rose thousands of feet skyward, turned day into night, as gray ash covered a vast portion of the state of Washington and beyond. For us to visit Mount St. Helens was an awesome experience!

Years ago I spoke with a man I thought perhaps I knew, but could not recall a name or how I may have known him. When I asked, he said, “You may have seen me in the *post office.*” That seemed feasible in that I regularly go to the post office. Later, I realized he probably intended this as a joke. Remember when they used to have pictures of “America’s Most Wanted Criminals” displayed on the wall of a post office?

More recently I was in the Palm Springs Post Office in a line which forms along a counter where people can place their items to be mailed. A moment or so after placing mine there, a man behind me said, “Hi Ralph! How are you?” I did not recognize him, and, never wanting to be unfriendly, I asked him to help my memory. He gave me his name as though I should recognize it. But it did not ring a bell. He did not leave

me hanging too long. He told me he was a jokester—that *he had seen my name on a box I was mailing!*

As I write, the Palm Springs Post Office I have gone to for many years had its final day this week—April 21, 2021—and has been replaced with a lovely new facility (see photo) closer to my house, just blocks away.



I was pleased years ago to obtain the simple number **21** for our ministry post office box, as compared with a longer, more complicated number. I still have this number, but have been given a new key for a new box, of course. According to the marker on the front of the former Post Office, it was dedicated when Richard Nixon was President. Being built on Indian land, the lease had run out, and the local tribe plans to build a hotel on that location.

I value the many good memories of people I have known back over the years. Red or yellow, black or white, all are precious in His sight. Quite a few have passed on now. We have a “blessed hope” for a glorious family Reunion some day around the Throne of God. What a Day that will be!

For a closing song, the upbeat words of a chorus written by Bill and Gloria Gaither come to mind:

***I'm so glad I'm a part
Of the family of God.
I've been washed in the fountain
Cleansed by His blood.
Joint heirs with Jesus
As we travel this sod,
For I'm part of the family,
The family of God!***

Additional copies of this printed article (also parts 1, 2, and 3 of this series) are available upon request, and may also be viewed on our website.

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