

Elise's Monthly Link Article

Letter From Elise

SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2010

STILL A FEW BUGS IN THE SYSTEM Dear Church Family, "Sometimes I think we're alone. Sometimes I think we're not. In either case the thought is staggering." Buckminster Fuller Warning: the next few paragraphs feature yucky, stinky, scary BUGS. Not adorable ladybugs, not winsome blinking fireflies, not spectacular rainbow-hued butterflies. These insects are the ones you want to hit. Or stand on chairs to get away from. The ones who bite and leave marks, or worse. The ones who haunt dreams (mine, anyway). Bugs: God's Questionable Creations. Read on, if you dare! In the vast verdant playground that is the lower East Side of Manhattan (not), my brushes with nature were few and far between. The tiny patch of grass in front of my apartment building was surrounded by a fence and a warm and fuzzy sign: "KEEP OFF." Indeed, when we moved out to the "burbs," it literally took months before I'd venture a toe onto the lawn, confident that police sirens and an arrest warrant were sure to follow. Animals, to me, were either a) securely, if unhappily, caged in the Central Park Zoo, or b) pigeons, fat and filthy denizens of the big city, cruising through life on discarded bagel crusts and puddles of Chock Full O'Nuts coffee. We were lucky enough to live in a building that was not roach- or ant-infested, so I literally never saw Nasty Bug One for nearly my first decade. Boy, were things about to change! Ardsley, New York, 1965. Intro to Daddy Longlegs (thank you, damp basement). Oh, my goodness, what planet were those from? I remember frantically throwing shoes at the bizarre spindly specimen, knocking off a leg but still unable to kill Daddy himself. Urrghhh. Atlanta, Georgia, 1968. Meet the Palmetto Bug, Cockroach on Steroids, a grotesque creature to be found—well, just about anywhere. Crunch, crunch, crunch underfoot. Duxbury, Massachusetts, 1971. Field Day. Yellowjackets. Oranges. Note: the correct approach is to drop the orange, not stand and fight. Nuff said. Fast forward through my kids' childhoods—insect reactions had a wide range: shrieks of terror for some, weird fascination for others. They were munchable for a few...such as Rose in Thailand. A delicacy there is small jumping bugs, swallowed alive—so you can enjoy the sensation of them tumbling down the throat, of course!—PJ—God only knows why, but as a baby he'd ALWAYS crawl straight to the nearest spider web for a snack. Delish! More seriously—the deer tick that bit Evan in 6th grade at a campout, leading to a year-long battle with Lyme Disease. Less seriously—the beetles of Costa Rica, so gargantuan as to seem almost—benign, pet-like. I'm no scientist, and I'm certainly no lover of all creatures great and small (humans excepted, for the most part). But honestly, don't most of us tend to look at the vast panoply of creepy-crawlies out there and wonder—what WAS the Divine Point? They seem, for the most part, pretty darned useless. Does God get a perverse kick out of seeing us, totally humiliated, hopping around, screaming and swatting, and covered with cute little welts? I went through a period of reading a bit of science fiction. There was often a pivotal moment in these books when the humans were brought up short by the aliens—we were shown to be slower, stupider, generally inferior. And, always, it was such a shocker. I mean, come on—weren't we "all that"? The crème de la crème of creation? Why were these aliens treating us like, well, like bugs? Do I think there might be sentient life elsewhere in the universe? Absolutely. As one character in a favorite movie of mine, Contact, put it, "If we're the only ones out there, it seems like such a waste of space." So, for the record, here's what I believe—I believe God created everything in the universe. Every jot and tittle. If there is life on other planets—guess what? Same God made them, too. Loves them, too. If there's a pecking order, I'm not sure we're at the very top of the heap, but guess what? I truly do NOT believe it matters. To whom much is given (and face it, who's been given more than us?) much is expected. Globally and beyond. God made people (and maybe there's an elastic universal definition of "people") and God made bugs (ditto). And God loves us all, and expects us to love, and value, each other. Period. Which translates into—why don't we let the bugs do their thing when we can? Because some days the bug is scuttling across the floor, and some days you're the scuttling bug. A children's song my kids and I remember with love is called "All God's Critters." Here are some of the lyrics: All God's critters got a place in the choir Some sing lower, some sing higher Some sing out loud on the telephone wire Others clap their hands, or paws, or anything they're got. God has His reasons for mosquitoes. And us. All in the choir. We need to trust Him. And try, really hard, NOT to sting or bite each other. Deal? Happy late summer. Bzzzz— Love,

JULY/AUGUST 2010

JOIN ME? "Beware the barrenness of a busy life." Socrates Dear Church Family, Took a quick flip through my bulging wallet yesterday (bulging with cards, not cash), and realized I am a member of six supermarket savers clubs. My, that's a lot of saving! By rights, I shouldn't owe supermarkets a dime for my purchases at this point! But seriously, six savers clubs is a little excessive, don't you think? And that's just groceries—I'm also a Barnes & Noble Reader's Advantage member, a member of the Delta Skymiles club (though I haven't actually flown Delta since 1992), and the list goes on. Seems I've been constitutionally incapable of declining when the conversation turns to joining just about anything. At one time, I was a member of 15 different organizations, ranging from the Naval Academy Parents Association to three different PTAs

(elementary, middle, high), two YMCAs (Ambler and Rehoboth, DE), and a Mother/Daughter Book Club. And, almost always, I was a truly terrible member. I would either pay my dues and then miss every meeting, or sign up for a job that I would do dreadfully (such as when, as a volunteer member of the Synod Helping Hands Day team, I mailed out directions to the 30 drivers taking youth to various locations. Who knew that you were supposed to affix proper postage to those envelopes?). You'd think, given the frenzy with which I signed on the dotted line, that my childhood would have been equally jam-packed with group activity. Not so much. Mom was a true "path of least resistance" parent. She would ask, half-heartedly, "You're not interested in being a Brownie, are you?" and look incredibly relieved when I said, "Not really." My sisters and I, therefore, spent an inordinate amount of after-school hours as members of the club "The TV Guides." Well, I've certainly made up for lost time. Finally, however, things began to change. When I realized I was speed-reading the month's book choice in the car parked in front of the host's house EVERY month, I tendered my first resignation. And, to my great surprise, I learned that the world did not end. So I've tried to become a bit more selective in my joining, and a bit more realistic in my commitments. When Sheridan went off to Curtis, for example, it was time to stop volunteering with Philadelphia Youth Orchestra Parents (though the PYO has die-hards whose offspring are now in their forties!). Sometimes enough is actually enough. I can't really picture Jesus as a big joiner, can you? Filling His days and nights with meetings? Saying "yes" to every invitation that came down the pike? One of the myriad ways our Lord modeled the perfect life was His sense of balance. He knew when to be with a group, and when to be alone. He always kept focus, and used every moment wisely. Even when the crowds clamored for Him to stick around, to teach one more lesson, heal one more person, He knew when enough was actually enough. He didn't need a bulging wallet filled with membership cards, and, really, neither do we. He knew exactly who He was, and where He belonged. And so should we. I may still have quite a bit on my plate these days, but at least I'm using a smaller plate. Gradually, I am winnowing some of those clubs from my life, to focus on the ones that truly matter to me. So thanks anyway, eager membership recruiters. "Past my limit" has been a pretty ridiculous place to be all these years. There's a magic two-letter word I'm learning to use, a word that's rocking my world. The word is "No." Love, Elise

MAY/JUNE 2010

THE LUCKIEST Dear Church Family, "I don't get many things right the first time/in fact, I am told that a lot/nor I know all the wrong turns, the stumbles and falls brought me here/and where was I before the day/ that I first saw your lovely face?/now I see it every day/and I know that I am...the luckiest." — Ben Folds If a huge old tree falls across a yard, and there is someone right inside to listen, does it make a sound? I now have an answer to that question. Amazingly, not that much of a sound. I was in the kitchen cooking dinner. Julie was asleep on the family room sofa, taking a Friday snooze after an exhausting week in school. The only thing I heard was nothing very remarkable. Just a rustling of leaves, a sound like the wind whipping through the branches. Then a soft thud. When I looked out the window, I saw it. The largest tree on our property had fallen over, completely uprooted. It had fallen away from the house, and taken down another big tree and a part of our neighbor's fence with it. It's a mess out there, and it's going to be an expensive nuisance to deal with. But we are the luckiest. Because the sofa where Jules slept is right against a window. Right outside that window was the tree. And had the tree fallen the other way, we might very well have lost our daughter. Right after Christmas, Sheridan woke up in New York in the middle of the night with severe stomach pains. He is the family stoic, who, as a child, used to deal with intense pain by doing pushups...Sheridan: the musical equivalent of a Navy SEAL. Needless to say, he braved it for hours and hours (and hours). Finally, during the early afternoon, he took a cab to the ER at St. Luke's Hospital, where it was discovered that his appendix was about to rupture. He got there just in time. He was the luckiest. I often bemoan my bad fortune. It's been 40 years since I last won anything, and that was a cheap tote bag at the grand opening of an Atlanta drugstore. I consider every raffle ticket purchased to be an automatic donation to the cause, whatever it may be, because there's not a chance I'll ever see a prize of any sort. 50/50 drawings? Merely an opportunity to practice my penmanship on dollar bills, to which I then wave bye-bye. If the Publisher's Clearing House car ever rolls up to our driveway, it will only be to check directions to the home of a lucky friend. But these two narrowly averted calamities reminded me. I'm not, after all, the Biggest Loser. Quite the opposite, in fact. Counting your blessings is a cliché, but it is really the only counting that truly matters. We so often become experts at counting other things—shortcomings, grievances, what we miss, what we lack. On any given day, we can all enumerate many instances and areas where others are the winners, not us. Indeed, that kind of counting can become a regular rhythm, the beat running through our lives. Let's face it. Unless you are Bill Gates, someone else will always be able to trump your house, your car, your investment portfolio, your vacation spot. But look around. Stop and think. Can you walk, talk, see, and hear? Do you have a roof over your head and food on your table? Did you wake up this morning? Do you have someone in this world who loves you? Do you have someone in this world to love? Then you are the luckiest. I look out the window and see the giant, felled maple tree. Realize how we came mere inches from tragedy. Know how many families do not have the incredible luck we have had all these years. Families who did absolutely nothing to deserve their bad fortune. Families who, legitimately, will have some questions for God when they get to Heaven. Questions I believe our loving God will be able to answer, as He wraps them in His arms, gifts them with their eternal

reward. Through the disappointments, financial struggles, and just plain downturns of everyday life, we are still the fortunate ones. For today at least, we've won the lottery. Tonight, Steve and I count our Five Blessings, and pray for their continued safety, for their happiness. And for them to be able, every single day, to say, "I am the luckiest." Love, Elise

MARCH/APRIL 2010

Adventures in missing the mark Dear Church Family, A glimpse of Seyfried birthdays past… Evan is 2! Winnie the Pooh party! Aunt C creates beautiful and detailed Winnie the Pooh piñata Guests arrive None of Evan's friends want to hit piñata, as no one wants to hurt Winnie the Pooh Finally Dad whacks Winnie, candy spills out, children cry PJ is 6! Surprise Party One! Send birthday child out with Dad to "go to the Acme"; guests arrive and hide Birthday child returns home Guests leap out from their hiding places. Birthday child is completely and utterly… Unsurprised, acting as if hiding and leaping friends happen every day Rose is 8! Fancy Dinner Party! Hire Sheridan to play violin; set table with best tablecloth and candles Guests arrive, hoping for pizza and a video No one listens to Sheridan's music No one eats the fancy dinner Steve is 40! Surprise Party Two! Send Steve out to bring gas can to "stranded" out-of-gas friend in upper Bucks County Guests begin to arrive, parking around the block to be stealthy Steve returns home, 30 minutes early, having found nifty shortcut to stranded friend Guests continue to gradually arrive and "surprise" guest of honor Each and every time I planned one of these birthday parties I forgot one tiny but important detail. Such as: 2-year-olds hate beating up Winnie the Pooh; it is impossible to surprise a 6-year-old; 8-year-olds usually don't adore beef stroganoff; 40-year-olds (at least my 40-year-old) tend to be pretty good at reading maps. I meant well, I always meant well—and tried hard. But something was always just a little off, just missing the mark. And this is exactly why serving others can be so tricky. We persist in making small talk with the homeless man in the soup kitchen; he evades our eyes. We descend on an Indian reservation to help, and are met with cold stares. We nervously blurt out "get well soon" to the hospice patient. We mean well, we always mean well—and try hard. But we need to stop and think. Have we forgotten some pretty important details? How would we feel if we were homeless—maybe embarrassed? If we were Native Americans on the reservation, maybe proud? If we were dying patients, maybe ready to stop pretending? And by the way, I've done every single thing I've just described. Jesus looked at, really penetrated the souls of, everyone he helped, everyone he healed. His interactions with people were very personal and thoughtful. He took each person's unique situation into account, and was able to make a powerful connection every single time. Can we try to follow in His footsteps? We can't always hit the bull's eye, of course. Into each life a piñata must fall. But when we stop and think, and then walk that mile in other shoes, we can make an incredible difference in the world. By really looking, listening, and meeting people right where they are, not where we think they should be. And that might well bring us, all of us, just a little closer to the mark. Love, Elise

FEBRUARY 2010

REBEL WITH A CAUSE Dear Church Family, Dateline: Flourtown PA December 21, 2009 10 AM Crime: Parking on the side of the street that is scheduled to be cleaned 12-21-09 10 AM My first parking ticket. My first ticket of any kind. Dum de-dum dum. (Dragnet theme, in case you were wondering.) And so: my premier entry onto the Montgomery County Crime Blotter. When I pull off my big bank job sometime in 2030, you can hearken back to this egregious flouting of Flourtown parking regulations and say, "There were all the signs." As you may have guessed, I am rather chicken-hearted when it comes to bending, much less breaking, the law. I would love to say "because I'm so darned morally upright, but that would violate commandment # 8. Honestly? I stay on the side of the angels because otherwise I WILL get caught. Bet the farm on it. So why bother? Ours are pragmatic lives, for the most part. We do our jobs to pay our bills, we mow our lawns, and send our kids to school, and register to vote, and send in our taxes. We don't complain (at least not publicly). Life just flows so much more smoothly when we maintain the status quo. But I've been having an amazing, ongoing conversation with Sheridan lately that challenges my notion that God Loves Those Who Go Along to Get Along. Sher is angry, really angry about the way some of God's people are living. He wants to do his part to help. He's determined, even if it involves personal sacrifice. He's taking a stand. What to say to a twenty-something with fire in his eyes and passion in his heart? The easy answer is: Be careful. Let someone else do it. "The poor we have always with us." Change will come, slowly, in time. Don't put yourself on the line. The hard answer is: Go for it, kiddo. Because that's what Jesus would have done, and would have us do. I am intensely uncomfortable giving this advice, because I know how it flies in the face of my own pattern of existence. Parking on the wrong side of the street (metaphorically speaking) is anathema to me. I don't even eat food one day past its expiration date. I've never yet taken that tag off a pillow ("Do not remove under penalty of law."). I was a child in the 60s—as opposed to a child of the 60s. Anti-war and civil rights protests were the stuff of my dinnertime TV viewing, not of my participation. But I watched Martin Luther King, and so many others who were challenging an unacceptable status quo. I remember the feeling they inspired in me, the passion. I remember wanting to be like them, to live bravely, with such a sense of purpose. What happened to me? As I aged, I gravitated towards a certain diplomatic neutrality. I came to believe (still

do) that everyone had the right to their feelings. But I concluded that, therefore, everyone should always keep those feelings to themselves, no matter what. But when is the time to step up to the plate and register an opinion? Much better yet, take action? It is, I suppose, clearer when you're young. Wrongs must be righted, plain and simple. When did I lose that clarity? At what age did I decide that it was better, always, to keep the peace than to speak out? In Scripture, Jesus had no such misgivings. Wrongs were wrongs, and the time to right them was now. He had absolutely no problem standing up to the current leadership and voicing his protest. He didn't mind the occasional parking ticket, as it were, if it was in the service of a greater good. Not at all. Timidity has never improved the world. Fear is the enemy. I gave Sheridan a subscription to Jim Wallis's excellent publication "Sojourners" for Christmas. It is a most eloquent call for us to be a people devoted to social justice. We are, as a church, this year, committed to providing clean water for some of the one billion people who don't even have this basic human need. Can I, can we, go further? Can we search the corners of our hearts and find the cause or causes that ignite the passion in us—local, global? The answer will differ from person to person, and that's absolutely fine. The idea is to engage the world, and not just let events wash over us. And then, can we become part of the solution, even if there's a cost? Do we dare to park on the wrong side of the street once in awhile? As we enter a brave new decade, what will it be? A blemish-free parking record? Or something more? Love, Elise

JANUARY 2010

BIRTHING Dear Church Family, Anyone who has had a baby in the past, oh, 45 or 50 years is familiar with Lamaze. Lamaze, I'm here to tell you, is the great lie perpetrated by, I guess, Monsieur Lamaze himself, and fed to pregnant women (who, at that point in pregnancy, will eat pretty much anything). Briefly, it is a method of controlled breathing that purports to drastically diminish, if not completely extinguish, labor pain. How fabulous, and about time, right? The way to a pure, unmedicated, blissful birthing experience! And so, during the 14th or 15th month of my first pregnancy, my loving partner (also known as "coach") and I, respectively, cheered and panted our way through "rehearsals" of the blessed event to come. We had an official Lamaze instructor, and fellow student/parents-to-be also cheering (the men) and panting (the beached whales) right along. So, while the rest of me was heavy enough to move with a forklift, my heart was light as those telltale first twinges began. Right on schedule, the twinges escalated, and Coach Steve began the familiar litany, urging and encouraging. But wait! Something was horribly wrong! No one had remembered to tell the baby about Lamaze! There I was, huffing and puffing to beat the band, and yet in ever-increasing AGONY. By hour #9, I was cursing M. Lamaze, my husband for his incredibly annoying pep talks, and myself for deciding to have children in the first place. Lest you think I am one to learn a lesson from this (even as it became obvious my children all preferred to put me through the notoriously "uncomfortable" back labor), I panted and, later, screamed my way through Babies #2 and #3. I bravely/stupidly rejected offers of medication because I had to prove myself to be heroic enough, strong enough, to take whatever my body could dish out. Number 3, Rosie, ever the drama queen, kept me waiting, and wailing, for my record of 14 hours before she arrived on the scene. At 1:30 PM on May 15, 1991, labor #4 commenced. At 1:31 PM I got my epidural. Now THAT was fabulous. But honestly, aren't we all constantly giving birth? To ideas, to projects, to plans? And don't these births involve preparation, then delivery? And, let's face it, isn't a lot of it pretty painful? All too often, we latch on to our one way of doing things, our one way of looking at life (our Lamaze method, if you will), then close our eyes and grit our teeth and bear the consequences when our way just doesn't work. Help is out there, help is all around, but we're too lost in our intensity to even notice. And even if we do notice, we're too proud to accept assistance. To do that, we'd have to accept our inadequacy. Our weakness. Our limits. We'd have to actually humble ourselves, and who wants to do that? Oh, wait. Jesus did. In a stable in Bethlehem. On the cross. And if God can humble Himself, why can't we? We are invited into the wonderful, topsy-turvy world of God's reality. Where the proud are brought low and the humble are not only helped, they are exalted. So, the next time your labors are frustrating and ineffective, the next time your determination to be a be-all and end-all is challenged, rejoice. You have been given a chance to be helped. To reach out your hand and to be lifted up, and out of your troubles. We never, after all, give birth alone. Our Coach is right beside us every time, offering us all the loving help we could ever need. We just have to stop panting long enough to say "thank you." Love, Elise

DECEMBER 2009

BE HERE NOW Dear Church Family, Breathing in, I know that I am breathing in. In through my nose. Breathing out, I know that I am breathing out. Out through my mouth. Soft music plays as I notice my scattered thoughts drifting through my head. And here's one of them, suddenly—PJ, age 4: "First I inhale, then I un-hale!" It catches me, this memory, the voice of my cheerful little guy telling me this at bedtime, putting on his "shamamas" after finishing his "sedert", nestling with so many Beanie Babies that he almost

disappears in a sea of plush. As a child, PJ was the King of the Present Moment. Occasionally those moments were sad, of course. I remember the day he accidentally let go of his balloon, and said, tears rolling down his cheeks, "It's OK. It's up there keepin' Grandpa company in Heaven!" But, an overwhelming majority of the time, PJ approached the world with unbridled joy and wonder. He greeted every new day with "Awesome!", each plan for an outing (even a trip to the Acme!) with "Yesssss!!! I KNEW it could happen!" Of course, this is how most little ones are. They laugh, they cry, they are fully present with every emotion, every second of their lives. As we age, we tend to lose that, some of us utterly. We live in a state of permanent distraction, suspended somewhere between yesterday and tomorrow, as minutes and hours, and then years, slip by unnoticed. But here's the funny thing. Where some of his siblings (taking after their mother of course!) stress and fret, plan and regret, PJ retains the now-ness of a child. As the years have passed, PJ has really never lost that deep, deep connection to the moment. PJ at 18 is still a happy camper. Or a sad camper. But, always, a "present" camper. If he's having a good day at lacrosse, the heavens rejoice. If he's having a Bad Science or Math Moment, the heavens weep. But—and here's the trick—it's all just for now, and PJ understands that. It comes, it passes. He doesn't seem to spend a lot of time dwelling, or letting thoughts of an unknown future cause him too much anxiety. This approach to "being" may have a practical drawback or two—I do recall the honking of many a carpool horn as Peege sat at the breakfast table, serenely contemplating his bowl of Honey-Nut Cheerios. But, by and large, what a way to experience the fullness of life! He returns for the weekend from college. Once more, a happy camper. He thoroughly enjoys his homemade dinner, his comfy bed, the washer and dryer that will launder his mountain of clothes, watching Navy beat Notre Dame on TV with his dad. He hunkers down and revels in the present moment. Buddhists would say this is the source of true happiness. Awareness. Mindfulness. Emptying the mind of projections, past and future. Reveling in the sight of the sun, the feel of that sun on your face, the taste and smell of a delicious bowl of soup, the sound of a loved one's voice. I struggle mightily with this, this mindfulness. Most of the time I'm multitasking—simultaneously obsessing about yesterday's goof-ups and dreading the probable goof-ups of tomorrow. It's so hard for me to be here, now. Even as I know that "now" is all there really is. But this morning, I sit in the meditation room at peace, at ease. For a change, I can concentrate on what I'm feeling. Right this second. And I'm feeling a bubbling up of love and thanks for PJ, and the lesson he's teaching me with his everyday life. And in my mind's ear I hear my loved one's voice. The sweet voice of a 4-year old. The deep, all-grown-up voice of an 18-year old. Welcoming me to here. Inhaling, I know that I am inhaling. Un-haling, I smile. Love, Elise

NOVEMBER 2009 Timeless Dear Church Family, Time after time. Time's up. Just in time. Time stands still. Time flies. Does anybody really know what time it is? My 35th high school reunion took place, without me, a few weeks ago in Atlanta. Luckily, I was able to get a glimpse of all the festivities on Facebook (yay technology), and I was…appalled. At myself. Aside from the dear friend who posted the (many) pictures, I did not recognize a single soul. No one. Zip. Nada. I couldn't even read their nametags, so those were no help. Who is the jolly, bald, and portly soul brandishing the beer pitcher? That graying grandmotherly type (yeah, yeah, I know, I could be a grandmother, too) waving to the camera? Not a solitary clue! Now, surely THEY would have all recognized ME. Right? Right? But these were my friends! And on graduation day in 1974 we hugged, we cried, we all swore we would never forget each other. We'd know each other anywhere…Mary Gail, Mary Pat, Mary Kay, Muff, May-May (and that was only a small fraction of the M's). The thing is, inside, I still feel like 17. In my heart. In my mind. A LOT. The camera, however, doesn't lie. Time has passed. A boatload of it. Physically, we have all undergone massive changes. We inhabit bodies that have worked hard, maybe partied hard, gotten too much sun and not enough exercise. Bodies that have given birth. Bodies with parts that are starting to rebel—knees, hips, eyes, ears. But there is a day, a year, a decade…a time in the past when we each still feel most at home, no matter how much time has passed since. For me that was, that is, the early 70s. After rocking Woodstock, before catching Saturday Night Fever. As the Wheel of Fashion spins back to miniskirts and maxidresses—even gladiator sandals, of which I owned a particularly impressive pair—I nod appreciatively. A whiff of sandalwood incense, the first notes of "Color My World" by Chicago, and I am back where I belong. Ironically, when I truly was 17 I used to be very impatient with the reminiscences of older people. Seriously, Grandma, the depression is OVER (I would think to myself). Let's move on here! Yo, Uncle Gerry? The 50s? Ozzie and Harriet and hula hoops! Ancient history! And now here I am, ever ready to discuss "Mary Tyler Moore" episodes, my 8-track tape collection, and my extremely groovy poster of Pink Floyd's "Dark Side of the Moon." It can be such a trap, you know. Worrying about time. And when thinking of Heaven and seeing departed loved ones again, it's easy to fall right into the trap. How old will they be? Will I even recognize them? How old will I look to them? Will they recognize me? Or will we be like the polite and puzzled strangers who reconnect in a Southern high school gym, squinting at nametags, and trying to remember? This Thanksgiving month, I need to be grateful for the passage of time that brings me closer to the Divine Reunion. Some of us arrive at the reunion after 17 years, or 52, or 92. But we're all invited. And then, after that, I need to be grateful for, and freed by, the confidence that God transcends time. That eternal life with God is an utterly transcendent life. A life where everyone is a newborn, a teenager, a young parent, a wise elder…all at once. Where we live, at last, the life of the timeless soul. It's OK to gaze in that mirror, or at those Facebook photos, with a pang of nostalgia for the way we were (and yes, "The Way We Were" was a big hit) in 1974.

It's OK to wrestle with the concept of time, as long as we know it's not the only reality. We are destined to soar outside of time, beyond it. We were made to see the souls instead of the bodies. So I might not know May-May from Adam if we meet in the St. Pius High gym someday over cheap wine and spinach dip. But I believe, that, along with everything else we will know and understand there, we will all know each other in Heaven. A Heaven of beautiful, of endless, of timeless, now. Love,

OCTOBER 2009 UNGIFTED Dear Church Family, Just a few of the things I am ungifted at: Bike riding. I have dined out on this tidbit for many a moon. I grew up in Manhattan, where only kamikaze bicycle messengers brave the mean streets. My little red trike didn't stand a chance. When I moved to the burbs, I had reached the age of acute embarrassment, and didn't dare try to ride. Hence: I am 52. I could not ride a bike if doing so would save me from the Apocalypse. Parallel parking. If I go somewhere (like, say, the city of Philadelphia) and there is a need to parallel park, I have a simple solution. I drive home. Blowing up balloons. Don't ask. Just totally creeps me out. Saying good-bye. Ask my children, especially a) Evan, who is shortly leaving for Hawaii for the next (sob) several years; b) Rosie, whose regular jaunts to faraway spots always cause me great angst; c) PJ, who recently left for Millersville University and, though he has left traces of himself behind (can you say phone charger? Wallet? Contact lenses?) still has wrenched my heart with his departure. And this, my friends, merely scratches the surface of my incompetence. In several of his letters, Paul writes, famously, of spiritual gifts. Prophecy, Ministry, Exhortation, Discernment of Spirits, Healing, etc. These passages, by the way, always make me feel almost cosmically inadequate. Spiritual gifts? I barely register on the radar screen. But sometimes, I read the list, and I wonder: what teaches us the greater spiritual lessons? Our God-given strengths, or our equally God-given frailties? I guess we all have Bible folk we identify with, some more than others. I am foursquare in the Peter camp. I often feel like a spiritual oaf, bumbling my way from day to day, rejecting what I'm supposed to be accepting, doubting when I'm supposed to be trusting. Wildly flawed. So, what to make of us, the company of the inept? We may not be particularly spiritually gifted, but we have a couple of things going for us. Well, for one thing, the ungifted are usually fairly humble. It's not as if we have much of a choice. Watch me attempt to pedal uphill, or nearly blow my brains out trying to inflate a balloon, and you'll see that my dignity has pretty much left the building. For another, the ungifted have a natural empathy for their fellow bozos. Put us in a room full of other ungifteds and we become the ultimate support system. Hey, anyone want to form a Chronic Solitaire Losers Club? I am so there. Seriously, though, we live in a world designed to reward winners, and disdain the rest of us. We raise our children in a culture so sensitive to their sensitivity that we award trophies to every tiny soccer munchkin; we grade on a 5.0 scale. As we age, we airbrush and Botox and dye away our imperfections. And we worship a God who radically, radically, rejects those values. Hard as it may be to look in that mirror and face those myriad shortcomings, we don't gaze alone. Our Lord stands behind us, and beside us. He reassures us that we may not find our selves sharing in the laundry list of spiritual gifts (Interpretation of Tongues, anyone?) He knows us to be far more Peter than Paul. Maybe our giftedness is —stick with me now—our very ungiftedness. God can and does work through Mother Teresa and Elise Seyfried alike (though we are emphatically NOT alike). And God's power is made manifest through our misses, maybe even more than our hits. The grace of God is a gift, an unearned, amazing gift. So who better to receive a gift than the ungifted? If it's been awhile since you've unwrapped the present of His love, it's time to party. There are definitely spiritual gifts, and most definitely those who, as my Grandma Berrigan would say, were standing behind the door when the Lord was giving out those spiritual gifts. So come on out, come out from behind the door. It's safe. You klutzes, you goofballs, you each actually fit quite well with the Divine Plan. Unclench your hearts and open your hands to receive the everlasting gift of His grace. Love, Elise

SEPTEMBER 2009

DO YOU KNOW WHAT IT MEANS TO MISS NEW ORLEANS? Dear Church Family, That is the title of a song. The writer wanted to convey his yearning for this incredible city, the longing for the jazz, the food, the people. He missed New Orleans, and wanted the rest of the world to miss it too. Flash to Monday morning, July 27th, 2009, 5:15 AM. I am standing outside our hotel, watching for the shuttle to take us to the airport and thence back home to Oreland. All is dark. All is silent. A solitary car passes by. Then the newspaper delivery truck stops in front of the hotel. The driver hops out with the morning's Times-Picayune. "Y'all leavin' today?" he asks me. I nod. "Too bad. New Orleans will be dead again" is his response. I stand there in the dark silence, thinking of Katrina. The emptying of this city. The tomb that was New Orleans in August 2005. New Orleans was dead, almost exactly four years ago. A wall of water drenched this city, water six feet deep that didn't drain for three weeks. Water that left a stench that lasted for two years. Water that washed away hope, washed away livelihoods, washed away some of what made New Orleans the most unique and wonderful city in America. Water peeled the surface away, and exposed the poorest, neediest of its citizens. People who were barely scraping by before Katrina, and were totally devastated in her wake. Many, many of those people are gone, a large percentage of the pre-Katrina population cannot return. Then there are the people who are still trying to rebuild their lives, who haven't stayed gone, who believe New Orleans can rise again. From July 22-27, 37,000 Lutheran young people enveloped the city of New Orleans in one giant collective hug. We came to serve, to learn, to meet the people and experience what this magical city still has to offer. Our group from Christ's painted two houses in the Gentilly district of town. The owners were two delightful older gentlemen, Bernard and Herman, who shared drinks, snacks, and stories with us. Stories of evacuation. Of the destruction of property and possessions. Of the long trip back to something near normal. We saw photos of sodden

furniture piled on the street corner, of ruined buildings and fallen trees. We heard the voices of those who lived through one of the great horrors of our time. And, with every word, we fell a little bit more in love with this brave town. This proud town, that has so graciously humbled itself to accept our help. This one-of-a-kind town. This New Orleans. Do you know what it means to miss New Orleans? We do. We miss beignets on Jackson Square and a ride on the steamboat Natchez. We miss Dixieland and streetcars and, yes, the mighty Mississippi River. We miss the incredible energy of the evening mass gatherings in the Superdome, once the site of the displaced and lost, now revitalized. We miss the kind people who went out of their way to thank us all for coming and serving. We miss New Orleans. And we ask that none of us ever forget. Katrina exemplified the disasters that life throws our way. The disasters, we can't control. Our response, we can. At the closing worship service, Bishop Mark Hanson reminded us all, all 37,000 of us, that, in God's eyes, we count for something. Everything. With such a vote of confidence by our Creator, what can't we do? Katrina washed away, but she also gave. Gave us all a chance to be of service. Gave us all a reminder that we live and breathe as God's emissaries on earth, going where the going is tough. Bringing new life. Bringing a fresh coat of paint. Bringing 37,000 loving hearts. Bringing hope. It was a joy and a privilege to accompany 19 of our young people on this adventure. If you get a chance, ask them to tell you their stories, their impressions. Come to our New Orleans Sunday service September 13th. I'm willing to bet this city has left no heart untouched. May God bless the city of New Orleans. Love, Elise

JULY 2009

WORKING Dear Church Family, Do you remember your first job? I know I certainly do. At age 11, I began to babysit. My first customers were a family with four children. I cared for their darlings for 35 cents an hour. (Note: please don't contact me! My rates have gone up!) These were the little charmers who, on my watch, fed their goldfish down the garbage disposal. Other babysitting adventures included the family who gave me two pages of instructions regarding their beloved dog, Snoopy. At the end of this presentation they added offhandedly, "Oh, and the baby will probably just sleep." Then there were the siblings who constantly tormented each other. One actually grew up to be the place kicker for the Chicago Bears. It figured. He'd had enough practice place kicking his brother. Later resumé highlights: Salesperson at an upscale Danish furniture store. During the entire time of my employment there, I made exactly two sales. Both to myself. Hostess at Daddy's Money Restaurant in Atlanta (yes, it really WAS as classy as it sounds). Actress at nearly every small-time dinner theatre in the Southeast. Oh, it was a choice assortment—the Mountaineer in Hurricane, WV; the Barn in Nashville, TN; the Celebrity in Birmingham, AL (which shared space with a bowling alley. In quiet moments of the play, the phrase "you could hear a pin drop" took on a whole new meaning). Kelly Girl (an array of temporary jobs, which could also count as acting). I pretended to fit in at a hospital, a law firm, and a blue jean factory. I don't believe anyone was fooled for a minute, as I mispronounced, misdialed, misfiled, and mislabeled my way through the days. Everyone has their early employment stories, both entertaining and horrific. Steve recalls his first summer job in steamy Valdosta, GA, toiling away at Buster Basford's cardboard box company. Good times. These first jobs provide invaluable lessons in responsibility. They offer opportunities to stretch in myriad ways, as we learn to do all sorts of things we never thought we could. We meet interesting people from all walks of life, and develop some unlikely friendships. We learn respect for workers everywhere, and gratitude for the paychecks we earn. This summer, a record number of young people (including my PJ) are pounding the pavements, looking for the job that will help fund their dreams. You'll see them scooping ice cream, lifeguarding, bussing tables, doing yard work. And when you see them, maybe you'll remember your own stories. Maybe you'll give them an encouraging smile, or drop an extra dollar in the tip jar. Maybe you'll even say a little prayer for them. And so we look forward to relaxing a bit in the months to come, thanking God for the gift of leisure time. But we can, and should, also give thanks to God for the gift of work, all kinds of work. The jobs we love and the jobs we merely endure. Each a chance to serve others and grow to be more well-rounded, wiser, and more compassionate people. May the Lord bless all the job seekers and finders, this summer and always. Love, Elise

JUNE 2009 READY OR NOT Dear Church Family, "98…99…100. Ready or not, here I come!" From my window I can hear the kids playing Hide and Seek. The countdown is finished, and it's time to be found. Item found in my carry-on for my flight to Charleston to see Evan: Fun and diverting reading material for a three-hour wait in Atlanta Airport—Noam Chomsky's *Hegemony or Survival* (a gift from Sheridan—my sweet kid has a flattering, but inflated idea of his mom's IQ—Mom cannot even define "hegemony"). It's going to be a looong layover. Items not found: Sunscreen Sunglasses shoes Toothbrush (I curse myself for this the next day, when I walk, sunburned and squinting, in 90 degree heat, all over Charleston, in patent leather flip-flops, looking for a place to buy a toothbrush.) I knew this trip was coming up. Really, I did. So why was I so unprepared? It seems like I'm always trying to prepare for events, only to arrive at those moments with only some of what I think I need. My sister, Maureen, it could be said, was never ready for anything. The nuns at Our Lady of Perpetual Help School cut her lots of slack on turning in homework and taking make-up tests. But no matter how long a reprieve she got, it wasn't long enough to study for the test or do the assignment. Later in life, she'd run out of milk before the recipe was finished, run out of gas before she got to work, run out of money before the rent was due. Mo probably didn't know when she woke up on September 30, 1981, that it would be

her last day, that a car crash would end her earthly life late that night. So you can imagine, true to form, she wasn't prepared. Will my last moments on earth feel like this, too? Getting to the airport with inadequate luggage? Out of time, out of food, out of gas? Perhaps. And yet. And yet. As the years have passed, I've come to truly believe that Mo was fully packed. That she actually had plenty of what she needed for her trip. That she'd learned exactly the lessons she needed to know before embarking. Even without my sunglasses and sensible shoes, the visit with Evan was absolutely wonderful. I had my son, so I did have all I really needed. Christ says, "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come." But the Lord knows. And I believe He is not trying to catch us unprepared. He calls us when we've learned the lessons we were put here to learn, whenever that might be. The servants in Jesus's parable aren't perfect. But they are watching. Their lamps are lit. They are keeping their eyes out for their Master. And maybe that's all that any of us can do. God knows when it's our time. And He runs to find us. If we keep watching, there will come the moment when our gaze will meet the Master's. He will look at us with forgiveness and the greatest, greatest love. And, "ready or not, we'll be home at last." Love, Elise

MAY 2009 NERVOUS

Dear Church Family,

"Who among you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?" Matthew 6:27

Yeah, yeah, I know it's true. In fact, I am sure I have subtracted probably 10 or 15 years from my earthly span with my endless fretting. But does this awareness stop me?

Hardly.

Take last Thursday, for example.

It was a New York City adventure involving two of our children, oldest and youngest. Sheridan was set to perform a piece he composed in a concert; Julie was set to take the bus, solo, from Manhattan to Boston to visit Rosie. What a perfect opportunity for Mom to swing into super-stress mode!!

All the way from Philly to New York, Julie chatted excitedly. She literally couldn't wait for this sisters weekend, and was even looking forward to the Bolt Bus that would ferry her, direct, from one city to the other. Meanwhile, I had conjured up quite the image of this bus—a dirty, unreliable wreck on wheels. Oh, and the passengers! A shady, seedy assortment right out of Dante's Inferno. What could I possibly have been thinking, giving the green light to this disastrous journey?

So of course the bus proved to be shining clean and spanking new. And her fellow travelers? A bunch of college students right out of a Gap commercial. My worry-meter, then, logically shifted to an image of her arriving in Massachusetts alone, with Rosie inexplicably delayed for their meeting. And sure enough, at 10 PM I got a frantic phone call: "Mom, she's not here. What am I going to do?" I knew it! I knew this would happen! But I didn't even have a chance to voice my panic before Julie continued, laughing, "Just kidding, Mom. Of course she picked me up on time, we're at her apartment now! You have GOT to stop worrying so much!"

At this, I relaxed slightly—but only slightly. My arms and legs were still numb from having been twisted into one rigid position for the entire 20 minutes of Sheridan's piano sonata earlier in the evening. This is my traditional way of "enjoying" his concerts—moving not a muscle, scarcely breathing, the only physical activity the profuse sweating of my palms. I always joke that I serve as Sheridan's "nerve sponge"; my sheer white-knuckled terror is the X factor that makes his cool, calm, and collected musical performances possible. But, I'm mortified to admit, I'm not really joking.

And in this current, very worrisome time, I know I have company. Many of us feel that our obsessing over the current financial crisis is somehow making a difference, besides the difference to our sleep, digestion, and sense of balance.

We have all the worst-case scenarios memorized, and we are the nerve sponges for the world.

But Jesus says NOT to worry, doesn't He?

Jesus says that Julie needs to live her life, to go ahead and take that Bolt Bus, and that He, along with Rose, will be there for the pick-up. Jesus says that the concert will go well because Sheridan has prepared, and not because his mother is sufficiently tense. And Jesus says that He is with us always, which would include our times of anxiety, loss, and

fear.

Of course, there are appropriate actions we can take, and He does not expect us to do nothing. But if we can just stop panicking, we can open ourselves to a great, great gift: "the serenity to accept the things we cannot change" right now. A serenity that can calm the world just when it most needs calming. A serenity that comes from our companionship with our Lord, who is here now and will be with us, rejoicing, when better times come.

Who will always be on the other end of our bus line, there for the pick-up.

Love, Elise

APRIL 2009 TAKING FLIGHT

Dear Church Family,

Andy Warhol once said that everyone would be famous for 15 minutes.

I'm still waiting.

But there was a moment, a golden, exciting moment, when Steve and I came tantalizingly close to a measure of fame.

And it all has to do with Howard Hughes.

Are you with me?

Waaay back in 1994, we were introduced, through a mutual friend, to a very interesting gentleman. A wealthy real estate developer, pilot, and passionate amateur pianist, this fellow had an idea. He envisioned an original musical based on the life of the billionaire recluse Howard Hughes. He'd sketched out a few tunes and was looking for a librettist and lyricist to turn the concept into reality. We were intrigued and challenged. Steve is an excellent playwright, and the two of us had collaborated on many creative projects before. I happen to love writing lyrics. While our subject matter currently skewed more towards the Three Little Pigs than the Spruce Goose (Hughes' legendary plane), we could do this! We were sure of it

So Steve plunged into research, and became an expert on the life of this brilliant, troubled icon. Though the world recalls him as a tragic figure, an eccentric germaphobe who roamed the globe until his death, Hughes as a young man was more, much more. He was an executive who owned TWA airlines, a pilot who set world records, a Hollywood producer who launched several notable careers. The show began to take shape. It would be this early young man of such promise that we would focus on. The play would end at the poignant moment when his decline was assured. It would be a powerful story with humor, pathos, and some memorable tunes. Steve toiled away on the script. We spent countless hours listening to the music, and working on lyrics. The project went through draft after draft. Songs and scenes were added and subtracted at a dizzying pace.

Eventually, "Flight" was poised for takeoff. Query letters, then copies of the script, went off to all corners of the country. We were proud of our work, though trying to be realistic about our chances for a real production. First we heard nothing, then we heard worse than nothing-the parade of rejections began. Long Wharf Theatre in New Haven: thanks but no thanks! Goodman Theatre in Chicago: nix! We started to feel like high school seniors hearing from colleges, as the mailbox filled with the dreaded thin envelopes that said "no way," usually in 50 words or less.

But then, a turning point. "Flight" was chosen as the winner of the Stanley Drama Award for 1999. This is a prestigious competition and was quite an honor, as previous winners included Jonathan Larson's "Rent" (maybe you've heard of it?). Scenes from the show would be performed at New York's Lamb's Club. It would be a gala evening, and maybe the beginning of a star-studded future. Our composer pulled out all the stops-we headed into the Big Apple by limo, no less! And had lunch at the 21 Club! We could get used to this life!

"Flight"'s timing seemed excellent, too-rumor had it that Leonardo Di Caprio was preparing to star as Howard Hughes in a major movie. Play and film could be a one-two theatrical punch!

The next few years saw some limited flurries of activity-another competition win or two, a performance in North Carolina. We continued to tweak and tweak; that song and dance number in Act One worked, that patter song in Act Two did not. Finally, another possible turning point: "Flight" received two staged readings off-Broadway. A well-regarded director and music director were hired, as was a very strong cast (including Miss America 1998 as Hughes' love interest). We invited friends and family into Manhattan, and both readings went extremely well. Once again we waited for the

capital P Production sure to follow such a strong showing.

Since you're reading this in the LINK and not Variety, you can probably guess what happened. "Flight" hasn't made it to cruising altitude. Like most other plays with Broadway aspirations, our show has not yet gotten that full New York production. While we haven't completely set the dream aside, we've come to realize how long the odds truly are. Success along the Great White Way eludes all but the very few.

We've come to believe we're not Broadway superstars right now for a reason, known to God if not to us. While we haven't "made it big," we remain proud of the work we did. Maybe we made it as big as we were supposed to with our "Flight" adventure. And if we never have our 15 minutes of fame, maybe God has better plans for that 15 minutes after all.

Love, Elise

MARCH 2009 CLUTTERED

Dear Church Family,

Rosie was home a few weeks ago, and came upstairs from her former bedroom (now Julie's) with a huge, filled black trash bag. "What's in there?" I asked. "Oh, just some old stuff I don't need anymore," was her breezy reply. It took me all of 10 seconds to be conquered by my curiosity. "Mind if I have a look?" "Mooom. You're just gonna save everything, and undo all my sorting. Oh, all right, go ahead!"

The first valuable thing I came across was her essay on surfing, written as a high school freshman for speech and debate class. Then came a paper from her year in Thailand. A hair elastic. Pens that surely still had a little life left in them. What finds!! I couldn't believe she was planning to chuck these treasures!! Little by little, the giant trash bag deflated as I salvaged item after item. At last I finished, and squirreled it all away. The papers went into a large plastic tub that slides under my bed, filled to overflowing with the kids' schoolwork that I have saved (not sorted, mind you, just saved). The perfectly good hair elastic went into the bathroom drawer with the 30 other hair elastics already in residence. The dried-up pens, into the mug in the kitchen where, along with the lime green crayon, dry erase marker, and pencil stub, they will join the family of useless writing implements by the phone.

I am a saver (unless it's something really important. Those things-money, jewelry, medical records-I tend to absentmindedly pitch). If my impulses are not checked, I will someday be the old lady whose house is packed with so much junk that she's featured on Action News.

And those of you who have had the treat of visiting my office at church know just what I mean.

The other night when I couldn't sleep, I imagined some disaster that would force our immediate evacuation. If I had one minute to decide what, besides my family, to salvage, what would I choose? The collection of programs from every single play I attended for the past 30 years would absolutely need to come. The 998-piece puzzles, the Beanie Babies, the four sets of decorative cheese spreaders-all keepers. The shelf full of empty DVD cases (I probably absentmindedly pitched the DVDs themselves)-never know when we'd need those! As it turns out, I'd better have a moving van permanently in the driveway, standing by to cart away my priceless possessions should a sudden need arise. Semper paratus!

The day will come when I have nothing to do (yeah, right). On that day, I will approach the attic, ready at last to face the immense array of boxes, envelopes, bins, and folders that live up there. That will be the day I finally catalogue everything, and summon the courage to wing "Christmas Cards 1978", as well as most of the 150 crayon drawings of a lighthouse at sunset that I have held onto from Sheridan's Naptime Art Period.

As they say, that will be the day.

In my heart I know it's only stuff. Life can so easily become a suffocating piling up of things. We didn't bring it all with us, and we sure can't take it with us when we go, at the end of our earthly story. And while we're here, what a burden it all can be.

Maybe it's time to wrest a little order from the chaos, and replace that moving van with a dumpster.

No Mom can serve two masters. Can I loosen my grip on my possessions so that I can grab God's Hand instead?

Love,

Elise

FEBRUARY 2009 SHEER PERFECTION

Dear Church Family,

You know, it takes real effort to bowl a 36 game. You have to be, not just a poor, but an abysmal athlete. We kept mixing up teams so that no one would be stuck with me for too long. Everywhere I landed, the cumulative score sank like a stone. Meanwhile, the kids and Steve laughed and joked around, nonchalantly knocking down pin after pin. The ones who hadn't bowled in years bowled the games of their lives. Julie's score ranked right up there with the big kids. My favorite moment was watching Sheridan actually take a cell phone call during his turn-he strolled up, still talking to his caller, and proceeded to get a strike. Everyone had advice for me: relax (my personal favorite, as I literally do not know how to do this, ever), twist your wrist a different way-not THAT way, Mom!, step out with your right foot, Mom, focus on sending the ball right down the middle. I tried every stance imaginable, several sizes of bowling balls-and still ended up in the gutter just about every time. It was frustrating. It was humiliating.

And if I had to come up with the perfect day, I'd search no farther than that one.

All five children were home for Christmas. After days of unpacking, visiting friends, and generally rushing around, we'd taken this day to enjoy a rare outing together as a family.

After my induction into the Bowler's Hall of Shame, we proceeded down to Chinatown. As he had done in the past, Sher ordered for the table (with his host of Chinese musician friends, he is the go-to guy in an Asian restaurant). Salt-baked squid (it's incredible, trust me). Watercress in garlic sauce. Honey-walnut shrimp. I was on a much firmer footing in Shiao Lan Kung than I'd been at Thunderbird Lanes. I cannot bowl. I can, however, eat. The laughter and joking continued (not ALL at my expense). We shared nine different dishes, and by the end not a chopstick-full was left.

You have to understand, we were not exactly The Waltons when they were all little. Stomping up to rooms and slamming doors were regular features of family dinners at one point. We would sit in the pew in church on Sunday and try to hide that fact that, just minutes before: the baby had been crying, one had made the baby cry, two had been fighting in the back seat of the car, and one had been sulking, because she just HATED what I made her wear. At our worst moments, I envisioned them all leaving home in a collective huff, permanently scarred by their upbringing, never to be heard from again.

Yet somehow, they made it through childhood, and made their way to these great relationships with each other. And a magical day like this.

Almost immediately, we would begin to disperse once more-Sheridan back to NYC, Evan to South Carolina, Rosie to Boston. But just for a few fleeting moments, we were all present and accounted for, safe and sound. Together and happy. Aware of just how lucky we were.

What does Heaven look like to you? To me, it's a day like that, one perfect day, the day that makes the tough days-and years-worth slogging through. God treats us to them, every once in awhile. Of course, life on earth is never an unbroken string of days like these. Only Heaven is. But on these perfect days, we get a glimpse of what will be, someday, forever. It's up to us to stop and notice. And be glad.

In this bleak midwinter, I wish you bowling alleys and Chinese restaurants, and perfect days with the people you love.

Love,

Elise JANUARY 2009 TALK TO ME

Dear Church Family,

“This comes to Evan Seyfried's voice mail.”

How I dread hearing that recording! Because I know that, though my message may indeed come to Evan Seyfried's voice mail, it will most likely languish there, unanswered, for the next hundred years. Evan was never the master communicator even when he lived at home. He doled out tiny morsels of information about school and social life strictly on a need-to-know basis-and most of the time he figured we didn't need to know it. If a two-year old could be described as the strong, silent type, well, that was Evan. At 22, the description is still rather apt. The Navy's secrets are safe with our son.

Sheridan is better, but not a whole lot better. Unlike Evan, he's not a complete phonaphobe. But he likes to call at night, preferably after I've been asleep about three hours, eager to settle in for a nice chat. While I may struggle to consciousness long enough to talk with him, I rarely remember anything we said the next morning. His is the wacky world of the young New Yorker about town, for whom "day" and "night" are mere suggestions. My bedtime has become embarrassingly early, so we are quite out-of-sync.

It's cliché to observe that Rosie is a relatively good correspondent because she's a girl, but whatever the reason, we actually do hear from her with more regularity. What Rose does, though, is specialize in The Cliffhanger-the frantic phone call about the super-urgent matter. After we've talked with her, we stew and stew and finally call her back to find out what's going on, by which point all is (usually happily) resolved and she seems a tad bewildered that we're following up at all.

On the home front, PJ is a faithful phoner; that is, every afternoon when it's time for a ride home from football. Only Jules calls merely to gab, truly Joanie's granddaughter.

I am somewhat more successful reaching my children via e-mail, but am guilty of writing missives of such length that my recipients give up on being able to appropriately respond. So they often don't. Texting works better still; alas, I text the way I play sports: very slowly and very poorly. I threaten to join Facebook; so far it's just an idle threat, but one of these days…

It is a primal need of parents to communicate with their children, any way that works. And hearing back, however delayed the response, is a moment of the greatest joy. We know the kids are busy with life; we understand; we are patient (most of the time, anyway). It's just that we miss them, and love them so much.

And we are, all of us, God's children. And He yearns to communicate with us, any way that works. And He waits, patiently (all of the time), as we stay so busy with life. He understands. But He misses us, and loves us so much.

A prayer is a voice mail, an e-mail, a text message to Him. Whenever and however it is uttered, a prayer to our Parent is heard and cherished. Whether it be a one-or-two worder ("help" comes to mind), a late, late night conversation, a cliffhanger, or just a request for a safe journey home, He is all ears. When we worry about finding the right time, place, or words, we delay our response to the boundless love that is His daily gift to us. We need to relax about form and phraseology and just go for it!

And who knows? The habit of prayer may make gabbers of us all.

He's waiting to hear. Anytime is fine. Go on, drop Him a line.

Happy New Year!

Love,
Elise

DECEMBER 2008 UNDER THE WEATHER

Dear Church Family,

Another holiday season is upon us! I note, as our children progress from growing up to all grown up, there is a marked difference in how we celebrate. We no longer throw up, as a rule. Our eardrums do not rupture. We do not break out in festive spots. When the five kids were tiny, that was as much a part of special days as fireworks and Yule logs: the ill-timed illness. The New Year we toasted with Robitussin. The Thanksgiving when the temperature of the roasting children rivaled the temperature of the roasted turkey. The Memorial Day memorialized as the Chicken Pox Wedding. Pop an Advil with me, won't you, as we stroll down memory lane.

My own holiday health report growing up was none too good (like the four New Year's Eves in a row that I had strep throat), so I shouldn't have been too surprised. But, like most new moms, I entered maternity confident that my offspring would be Superbabies, the hardiest of stock. After all, staying healthy was a simple matter of proper diet, fresh air, and good hygiene, right? I nursed, I took them on brisk walks, I scrubbed my hands till they were raw. Results? Sheridan was in the ER with bronchitis over Fourth of July weekend. Evan endured a nasty bout of rotavirus, landing in Abington Hospital (week before Easter). Rosie had colic (Christmas), PJ had a whopping double ear infection (Halloween), Julie ended up in Abington with RSV, respiratory syncytial virus (New Year's week). Seems the Cunningham sickness tradition trumped all my precautions after all.

For sheer drama, though, none of the array of childhood illnesses equaled the quadrifecta, the Chicken Pox Wedding. It was Memorial Day weekend, 1993. We were invited to our niece's wedding in Kansas City. More than invited, involved. Evan was ringbearer, Rose was flower girl. At that point in parenthood, we were so starved for fun and frolic that the

prospect of a flight to Kansas with four kids under age 6 rivaled a Club Med vacay.

So, naturally, Evan came home festooned with red dots three weeks before the Big Day. After diagnosis, our pediatrician prescribed Aveeno baths and a calendar. If we could make it past day 21 we were home free, the rest of the kids would most likely emerge from this bout of the pox unscathed.

Wedding Day minus 1. Wedding rehearsal. Evan, a little scabby but otherwise adorable in his tiny tux. Rose, clear-skinned and cute in her flower girl regalia. Out of the woods, nearly!!

Carrie's Wedding Day! Sunny skies, happy guests, radiant bride. Evan does not lose the rings. Rosie does not lose her cool. The couple are united. It is a spotless moment in time.

Wedding Day plus 1. We are relaxing in my sister-in-law's home, watching the Indianapolis 500 on TV (this is a family from Indiana, so the 500 is sacred ground), anticipating a couple of days of R&R in Kansas City. Sheridan queries: "What's this red thing on my ear?" Simultaneously, Rose pipes up, "I have one of those on my face!" PJ just squirms and scratches a red thing on his nose. We call Delta Airlines, pronto. Can we make it on board before a major breakout and our sure quarantine? Turns out, we can, barely. Our voyage home is a tense affair, tenses still because we can't seem to get Rosie to quiet down ("Hey, Mom, here's another pox!! And I see another pox!!")

Home, to two weeks of more Aveeno baths and misery. Another holiday bites the dust.

I realize, with humble gratitude, that our parade of woes pales in comparison to families who battle truly serious illnesses. We have been lucky indeed to endure merely the usual aches and pains. But it has been sort of comical to note that many of our under-the-weather times coincide with "special" times on the calendar.

We live in this suspension, don't we? Happy/unhappy, good news/bad news? When all around us are dancing, how often are we in the doldrums? It can feel as if we live out of sync with the world.

But we are never alone. We have a God who is there through the happy and unhappy equally, the healthy and sick alike, the good news/bad news all the same. Out of sync with the world, we still live in sync with the One who made us and cares for us through it all. Who clears up those ear infections and tummy wobbles, in His time. Irrespective of the assigned dates of man-made festivity, our bodies travel through life, sometimes well, sometimes ill. All times loved.

So this year we will probably not mark the holidays with Benadryl and humidifiers. But we will always remember the baby years when we did, when we shepherded our little ones past the shoals of those first small calamities. And we will marvel at, and give thanks for, the healthy young adults our kids have become.

Merry, pox-free Christmas. God bless us, everyone.

Love,

Elise

NOVEMBER 2008 MEASURED IN MILESTONES

Dear Church Family,

The other night I was relaxing in front of the TV, remote in hand. Click.

"Bill Jones voted against the spotted loon protection act. He was in the bathroom during the vote on the Grumplesnort initiative. He once approved a hefty 1% pay raise-for himself! Bill Jones. Wrong for Pleasant Acres. Wrong for New Jersey. Wrong for the Tri-state area, wrong for the Planet Earth, wrong, wrong, wrong…”

Click.

Yup, it's that time of year! There's another milestone coming up on November 4th, in case I needed reminding. And I got to thinking. A big, associated milestone is coming up for Rose. This month she will vote in her very first presidential election. I will remember mine.

OK. OK. 1976. You can do the math.

But I vividly recall feeling, in such an important way, like an adult for the first time. Being a good citizen. Casting my ballot. Helping to decide the fate of the nation.

Thanksgiving 2006 was a milestone for our family, the first without my mother. And while she was with us in spirit (how

she hated cooking Thanksgiving dinner! We remembered the time she put the green bean casserole on the clothes dryer and we didn't find it till the next morning!) her physical absence was profoundly felt.

December 2007, another milestone-our youngest child became a teenager. As is so often the case with the baby of the family, Julie had already celebrated her "first rock concert."

And so it goes. We measure out our lives in milestones, those events that mark the passage of our time on earth. Birthdays, anniversaries. Sleeping through the night. First tooth. Graduation. First date. First job. First home. Retirement. Each has a unique impact on us and those who love us. Some milestones are poignant, many joyful.

And, since we are the family of Christ, all these milestones are spiritual, too. Everyday life is a sacred thing, and shouldn't be separated in our minds from what we do at church. There are special religious milestones, to be sure- Baptism, First Communion, Confirmation. Weddings, Funerals. But what about the in-between times? Shouldn't they be marked in a faith-filled way, bathed in prayer?

I recently attended a wonderful conference called Milestones Ministry. We discussed the need, as a faith community, to help families find new ways to practice faith at home, and to make a stronger connection between home and church through the observance of life's milestones. I came away with an array of inspiring ideas, and I am hoping we may embrace some of them here at Christ's in the years to come. Wouldn't it be wonderful, for example, to celebrate all our new drivers (now there's a milestone for you. Most of us remember taking that driver's test, right? How many took it, ahem, more than once?) with a special blessing-in church? How about a blessing of the backpacks each year to mark the first day of school?

I immediately began to put one home idea into practice. Every night, and in the morning before the kids leave for the day, I make the sign of the cross with my thumb on their foreheads, to remind them of the One who travels with them every minute. So simple, but it's a way to acknowledge my parental role as spiritual, as well as secular. And so, this November, we will say a special prayer for Rose, for wisdom and discernment as she casts that first vote. We will bless PJ as he applies to college. We will think of a new way to bring faith to the holiday table at Thanksgiving.

We all can mark our many personal milestones in the light of Christ's love, and so give them even deeper meaning. Milestones help us remember that our lives, after all, are gifts. And miracles.

So, let us pray. And celebrate. Together.

Love,

Elise

OCTOBER 2008 SKYDIVING Dear Church Family, "Look! Here they come!" The crowd gathers. A finger points upward; we crane our necks to follow. Suddenly, appearing in the clouds, a bright orange flash. Then a yellow. A green. A red. As we watch, the shapes form—parachutes. Spread out like multicolor stars in a blue, blue sky, they drift slowly down. From this distance, it is impossible to see human forms attached to these beautiful bits of cloth. Seconds pass. A minute. Now one chute, the first one seen, comes into sharper focus: there are two people attached to one another, suspended in the air. A tandem dive. Another. Here comes a solo. Gradually the 8 divers approach the earth, arcing gracefully in the breeze. And now, at last, it is possible to recognize individuals. There is Sheridan. There is Rose. The ride is almost over. They come to rest in the grass, surrounded by the billowy folds of their vivid parachutes. For the first time in 20 minutes (or so it feels), I take a breath. They walk towards the airport, grinning widely. They greet me, words tumbling out fast— "awesome—so exciting—14,000 feet up— the view was so gorgeous—freefall was the best—so cold up there—felt unreal—can't wait to do it again." I am only half-listening, because I'm still muttering "Hail Marys" under my breath. They are laughing, joking around, relaxed and happy. My sweaty fists have yet to unclench. They are safe. I am a wreck.

So what else is new? Adventure and I have a long history of pursuit and escape—it chases me, and I do my best to stay far, far away. Life presents frequent opportunities to cast fear to the winds and go for it, "it" being just about anything involving heights, water, speed, tight places, darkness, physical agility, and the list goes on. My motto: "Just say no." The few times I have succumbed to pressure and given daring activities a whirl, I've been sorry. My first and last time snorkeling I was so seasick that, for the rest of my vacation, total strangers would come up to me and ask if I was feeling better. My first and last jungle canopy tour (in Costa Rica), I was so terrified of being in a harness in the air that I missed the tropical birds, the iguanas, the howler monkeys—indeed, I never once looked down, or around me (the whole point of doing this, I think). My idea of risk and thrills is going 30 in a 25 mile zone. I find it both amusing and dismaying to realize that every single one of my kids is a million times braver than me. As is my husband. The whole bunch of them love long hikes to high, rocky outlooks, where they stand at the edge of the precipice and relish the sight of the world beneath them. I am afraid to even look at the pictures they take. At my age I don't anticipate a big change in my personality. Though they promise to take me with them on their daring escapades, my loved ones don't seriously believe I would ever join them. But there was a moment, a fleeting moment, that glorious late-summer Sunday when I got a glimpse of something more. For an instant, I saw Sheridan and

Rosie falling from the sky, and for an instant I forgot to be afraid. My children took a giant and literal leap of faith, out of a plane and down, down, down into a world they love and do not fear. A world where life can be risky, but promises a rush of joy for those who dare to take a few chances. I watched my children, turned them over to the God who cherishes them, and I forgot to panic. That rainbow of divers floating down from the heavens was so beautiful. And if my heart filled with the wonder of that moment, I could only imagine how my kids felt. The rush of icy air. The chute opens, and freefall slows to drift. And there are lakes and fields and roads, dotting the distant landscape. The sun is so bright. It is so good to be alive. I can only imagine a life filled with that feeling. They don't have to imagine. The world is spread out below, and they can't wait to dive in to it all. God grant me the grace to let them go. Joyfully.

Love, ELISE SEPTEMBER 2008 CARVING OUT

Dear Church Family,

Last week, during our mission trip to Vermont, we visited a marble quarry and carving studio. It was a New England summer evening (meaning the bugs were out en masse to enjoy it as well). In addition to a tour of the quarry, we were each given an opportunity to use carving tools and try to make our mark on stone. While some of the kids did an impressive job, the rest of us had to be satisfied with hacking off a miniscule chunk or two. A look around the outdoor sculpture garden, and the beautiful works of art inside the studio, and we saw with new eyes the effort it takes to create a statue. As team leader Karin DeRuosi observed, sculpting is so different, because it is making art by taking away, not by adding.

It was a week of adding for us—we added buckets of dirt along a mountain trail, buckets of paint on a bridge, racks of clothes at the Salvation Army store, games and laughter to the Kids Club. We like to think we added something to the quality of life in Rutland by our work.

But when I look back, with new eyes, I see more beauty in what was taken away.

We arrived, tired but expectant, ready to be filled up with all the week had to offer. Hungry for fellowship, for fun, for hard work, for a deep spiritual experience. And every hour, there was a stripping away, an exposure of our weaknesses, our vulnerability. Every hour brought surprising developments, and as we had to adapt, we had to dig deep within ourselves for the resources.

We arrived without our technology: no cell phones, ipods, video games. No computers. No TV. And, despite some initial discomfort, we felt lightened. Lessened, in a good way. Less distracted. Less dis-engaged. Less encumbered by "stuff";.

We arrived as the CLC group, and found we needed to blend with kids and adults from two other churches. The circumstances threw us into an immediate intimacy when we formed work crews together. As acquaintances blossomed into friendships, we dared to expose our true selves, at work, at play, at worship. There was a shedding of formality and pretense as we all plunged into this exciting new experience.

All of us had to shed our normal standards of cleanliness and grooming, as the extent of our daily beautifying ritual was an ice cold, three-minute shower. I saw (and smelled) clothes that had been worked in. Hard. I saw hair untouched by blow-dryers, faces without makeup. Last week, these ornamentations were suddenly not important. And so they fell away.

It is easy to think of God as the Divine Painter, creating a breathtaking world of color and light and shape with His brilliant brush. Painting a rainbow. Adorning the trees with beautiful birds. But last week I came to see God as the Sculptor. We come to Him, solid flesh and blood. And He chips away. Hardships. Tragedies. All change us, take away our comfort and complacency. Reduce our pride. Opportunities. Challenges. He chips some more, revealing a strength within us. Compassion. Honesty. As He carves, something begins to emerge from the blocks of marble that we are. Our very essence. And, because of the artistry of the Sculptor, that essence shines. It is new, stripped down, exposed, revealed. And if we are willing to let God shape us, we can see even the harshest moments of life with new eyes. We were created, and are in the process of being re-created. God wants to make us beautiful works of art. And, down in our very core, that is what we can become.

So maybe we are less than we were before we came to Rutland. But maybe, just maybe, less is a whole lot more.

Love,

ELISE

JULY 2008 EXERCISING MY OPTIONS Dear Church Family, Isn't running wonderful? Racing through the streets in every season, pulse pounding, legs aching, body sweating… hooray for running. What a super way to get into shape! And the gym! The perfect spot when the weather is inclement and you still want your hour or two of heart-rate-elevating activity. Treadmill, stationary bike, CNN on the big TV… what's not to love? And exercise videos! My collection ranges from the classics (Jane Fonda, circa 1988) to "Awesome Abs in 10 Days" to a hip-hop

kickboxing routine. A veritable library for the home fitness buff! And now, summer, with its plethora of choices! Swimming, hiking, tennis, softball, hang gliding, surfing…a million ways to move in the great outdoors! Not that I do any of this, mind you. I hate exercise to the same degree that I love coffee—wildly, immoderately. Physical fitness, like decaf, is for others, those poor souls who want to live long, healthy lives. Seriously, though, I know in theory that exercise has much to recommend it. For one thing, cute workout clothes. I’m trying to think of a second thing. Give me a minute. No, I’ve never had that “endorphin high” that the true athlete raves about. For me, working out is like hitting yourself in the head with a hammer. It feels so good when it stops. For many years I kept in fairly decent shape by acting. Once in awhile I would attempt a class (yoga, jazzercise), attend sporadically, do poorly, and drop out. Nowadays it is only my perpetual state of nervous energy that keeps me relatively slim. Otherwise, I am a true computer potato, tappity-tapping away all day, getting up at work only to walk next door to the office, and then only when I can’t convey the message by shouting. There will come a day when my legs will buckle beneath me, I’m sure, from lack of use. Until that day comes, I will probably exercise nothing but my flying fingers. Steve doesn’t have many chances to work out besides his very aerobic performances, but when he gets a minute, it’s off on the bike, or to the basketball court. He knows what’s good for him, and he does it. The kids emulate him much more than me—even the “non-sporty” ones still clock many a daily mile striding down city streets. When the five Seyfried children are together, they exercise by choice! (Picture the Kennedy family at Hyannisport, substitute a Frisbee for touch football). I enjoy watching them out the window, as I sit at the dining room table with my fortifying cup of java. Why (and I can’t be the first to have noticed this) are the things that are good for you so much harder and less appealing than the things that are bad for you? Why do I not power-walk down to visit a neighbor, munching a healthful apple? Why do I climb into the car for this one block odyssey, munching a Dunkin Donut if one is handy? All the fitness statistics in the world have not, so far, altered my behavior a whit. I’m stuck, mired in my bad habits. The excuses are many, and spring quickly to my lips. And even if I tried to change now, I reason, it would take me forever to get into shape, and forever I ain’t got. My body is a precious gift from God, and I see fit to leave it under the bed collecting dust. The Christian life is full of “exercises” that can be just so much easier to skip. But the true Christian does not see the homeless man and pass by. The real Christian helps to build the Habitat house, serves at the soup kitchen, visits the shut-in. These are not the activities that will enlarge a bank account, or aid a climb to the top. But they are the acts of love that should take up much of our days; instead, it is all too tempting to let the world’s priorities dictate our own. And so the years pass. Our “giving” muscles get flabby. Our spiritual Nordic tracks rust. We settle. We settle, when we know we are called to do and be more, so much more. Just as I know that I should exercise, even a little bit. And I don’t. Maybe it isn’t too late to try again. I can certainly make a start. Hang up the car keys and step away from the Twinkie. And while I’m at it, work on some of those other bad habits of mine (and they are legion). There is time, after all. I can honor the gift of my health, and do what I can to maintain it. I can push back against society’s priorities, a worthwhile exercise if ever there was one. And I can decide: how will I shape my tomorrows? Love,

ELISE JUNE 2008 MNEMONIADear Church Family, Just ran into a neighbor in the Acme. She was warm, friendly, and obviously knew who I was. I know this because she called me by name. As I stood there, squirming by the freezer case, 10 different names crossed my mind for this woman. Jennie? Jeanie? Joanie? Bob? (well, maybe not Bob). I ended the conversation, which was filled with references to a husband and kids whose names I also could not recall, by calling her “honey”. This was a cop-out, though not out of character for me. I am a “sweetie-honey” sayer by nature, as you probably know. In this regard, I would do well as a waitress at the Melrose Diner (“More coffee, hon?”) Anyhow, I walked away from the encounter distressed. On to the cereal aisle, where I stood for several minutes trying to summon up Julie’s special request. Mini-wheats? Frosted flakes? All-bran? (well, maybe not All-bran). Oh, I made a grocery list. I just didn’t remember to bring it. At the checkout counter, I rifled through my purse frantically looking for A) my Acme Supercard, B) my American Express card, and C) my car keys. All were located, but my concern was understandable, as I have left these three items on counters all over Southeastern Pennsylvania at one time or another. To cap off this Adventure in Amnesia, I pushed the shopping cart up and down the lot looking for my car. How hard could it be to find an Elantra? Pretty darned hard when, as it turned out, I’d driven the minivan to the store. Chatting with friends in Club Menopause with me, I realize this malady is not uncommon in us fiftysomethings. Many of us enter rooms for unknown reasons, pour milk for absent children, wash our hair twice in the shower (just to be on the safe side). But for me, the sad thing is, I used to have a really good memory. Really. I could recall entire conversations from years past, what I wore on my first date with Steve, my telephone number from 1961. And now, pfft. Gone with the wind. It took me quite awhile to avail myself of various mnemonic devices—the little tricks that prop up a failing brain. And most of these, I still forget to use. One idea I did embrace: I kept journals for each of the kids when they were tiny, so I’d have a record of their cute sayings and doings. For years, they stayed securely in a bookcase in our room. As I write this, I have just found the journals, after a panicky 24+ hours of combing the house for them. They had migrated, quite logically, to the attic, under the Christmas ornaments. Of course, where else? What we remember, and what fades away, fascinates me. It has nothing to do with desire, I’ve concluded. How else to explain that, 27 years later, I can no longer recall the sound of my sister Maureen’s voice, yet the lyrics and tune of a 27-year old McDonald’s jingle remain ever-fresh? How can I quote our production of Cinderella accurately, chapter and verse, yet ALWAYS leave the oven on during dinner? It’s quite annoying. Where was I going with this? Just a second ... Oh, yeah! When I was little, I had what I firmly believed was a very strong memory of being in Heaven before my birth. There were the requisite clouds and angels, and a really benevolent, grandpa-ish God. Apparently I got to request my parents, and was sent down to earth on something resembling a playground slide. And, for awhile, this “memory” was as real to me as anything I knew. I knew

that God had loved me before I was born. At some point I let go of this vision of Paradise, teeming with babies placing orders for their future families. But I never let go of the feeling. The feeling of being loved before I could love anyone myself. Loved by my parents, certainly. But also loved by Someone else, before, during, and after my life. So, I hold to the feeling, and the sense that I am me and no one else for a reason, whatever that reason might be. And as I stumble and slip absent-mindedly through this world, I sometimes wander into a profound Truth: that I may be adding something memorable to the human story just by living my life. God is using me daily (and if ever there was a leaky vessel for His Grace, brother, this is it). Nevertheless, He finds a way to continue the story through me. One of my favorite hymns is a relatively new one. Ken plays it every Maundy Thursday. The title of it is God Remembers. The lyrics remind us that God remembers pain. God remembers love. God remembers us. And if God remembers, maybe I can relax when I forget. Love,

ELISE

MAY 2008 OUR LATEST MOVE

Dear Church Family,

You've lived in your house a looonng time if…

You can remember having a slide shaped like an elephant in the back yard

also a wading pool

and your child is almost 24

A tour of the house yields a wealth of memories, just based on the damage alone- scratches on the living room floor (tap dancing), the gouge in the wall behind the bunks (bed jumping), the crack in the garage window (lacrosse practice), the mysterious dent in the dining room table (still a mystery)

Everyone has, at one time or another, slept in every bedroom

You haven't had to worry about new phone numbers or forwarded mail since 1988.

Next June, we will be in our house 20 years. Now, I realize in this area that is no record. Here, many people tend to remain in their neighborhoods, if not their same houses, for lifetimes. I remember being introduced to someone who told me she "wasn't from around here." She was, as it turned out, from Flourtown (perhaps a foreign exchange program brought her to Oreland). For me personally, our longevity is nothing short of remarkable.

I was not a child of the military; however, my dad was a salesman who quite often switched jobs. By the time I was a junior in high school I had attended 8 schools in 3 states. Every couple of years it was time to pack up our duds and head on out to the next adventure. As we were pretty inept packers, even with all that practice, we left a trail of belongings wherever we went (or threw them away by accident in our moving frenzy).

Our dwellings tended to be a little on the quirky side. For quirky, read: bad heating systems, leaking roofs, bugs, and basements you could float a boat in every rainstorm. There was the poorly built apartment by the highway in Atlanta, that shook with the passing of every vehicle outside. There was the isolated New England house beside the cranberry bog, 10 miles from town (Mom didn't drive; Dad was on the road all week. Perhaps we should have thought that one through). Then there was the New York house whose former owners had 14 children (yet only one bathroom!).

When Steve and I first married, the vagabond life continued for awhile. As actors, we lived where the work was (Alabama, Tennessee, Florida). Once we went on a children's theatre tour, and literally lived in motels for almost 2 years.

When we began our family, I wanted nothing more than to settle somewhere, to put down roots. When child #3 came along and we outgrew our starter house (also in Oreland), we moved one final time. And here we are to this day.

Staying in one place, especially to raise kids, has its definite advantages. One school system, one group of neighbors, one church. Yet there are times I long to break free, to call the moving company, to hit the open road once again. To get rid of half the stuff we own. To wake up in a new town, to meet all new people. Our children seem to have similar longings, now, though they will probably tell you they enjoyed not having to move, then. So far, the oldest 3 are in NYC, Annapolis, and Boston. They have seen France, Brazil, Thailand. Even Flourtown. And the world looks pretty good to them, pretty exciting. Settling down is for later-much later. Now is the time to look at Mom and Dad, waving, from the rear view mirror.

And so. Life. You move; you don't move. You know your surroundings intimately; you're constantly surprised by something new. So what is home? Home is not a zip code, new digs, or a residence of 20 years. Home is the feeling of belonging somewhere. Home is knowing someone is there for us, around the corner or around the globe. If we can think of God as a person, we can also think of Him as a place. Home. Our Home in the world, and beyond the world. A Home we can never leave, no matter where we go. Or where we stay.

Sometimes, I marvel at the depth of the roots I've put down, after all that wandering. And having been both, I still don't honestly know what I'd choose to be: oldtimer or newcomer. But as a child of God, I do know that wherever I am, there I am. Home.

Love,

Elise

APRIL 2008 A BLOOMING SHAME

Dear Church Family,

Oh no. Spring again. How embarrassing.

Our neighborhood is filled with carefully mown lawns and meticulously tended gardens, erupting in a riot of color and fragrance, virtually our own branch of the Philadelphia Flower Show.

And then there's our house.

We purchased a home whose former owners were gardeners of such talent that even in the Wonderful Land of Oz that is East Oreland in springtime, ours was known as "the house with the beautiful yard";

For about two months.

At the end of that time we had pretty well polished off the delicate blossoms and started destroying the hardier plantings. Our mimosa sprouted fungus, our daffodils drooped, and our tulips tanked. Ivy crept over the flower beds. Then we killed the ivy. Our grass promptly took the cue and died too. The little birdies skipped our perches in disdain. Even the squirrels, not known as the pickiest creatures in the animal kingdom, seemed to give the exterior of 122 Apel Avenue a wide berth.

And things have only gone downhill from there. Other yards evoke the meadows of Provence, or the pristine flower gardens of the English countryside. Our yard tends to evoke downtown Baghdad.

It doesn't look like we even try, but actually we do (or at least Steve does). We mow, we prune, we weed (or at least Steve does). My forays into the great outdoors tend to just cut a wide swath of destruction, so I try to stay away. Still, the yard seems to know, somehow, that someone with the black thumb of doom lives nearby. The dandelions and gout weed know who's in charge. They are.

I don't get it. I love flowers as much as the next person. I would never deliberately commit planticide, and yet, spring after spring, I do. (You have possibly read of my prowess with pets; I bat .000 in that department too. Indeed, it seems the only thing I can raise is children.)

Sometimes I think of our yard as a metaphor for life. (Well, it's not good for much of anything else!) We are given a Paradise to enjoy, a riot of color and fragrance, of peace and harmony. And what do we do? We barrel through, stepping on the flowers, tearing up the trees, destroying everything in our path. We may be able to keep a semblance of order on our front lawn, but if you just take a peek in the back there is rot, there is ruin. And we don't mean to, we would never deliberately, make such a mess of things. But we do.

We have a Gardener who is available to us 24/7, a Gardener who can help us rake up the moldy leaves and feed the parched grass, who can free the flowers from their bed of choking weeds. A Gardener who can help us make a Paradise again. And we don't even call Him. And so on we struggle, black thumbs against His green one.

But there is, always, a Spring. And with Spring, hope for another chance. With the Gardener by our side, we can wrest beauty out of the most colossal mess. The sun is a little brighter, a little warmer, every day now. While there is life, we can still learn. There's still time to make our gardens grow.

The Yard of the Month Award may be absolutely out of the Seyfrieds' reach. But this year, if we really try, we just may have a shot at Most Improved.

Love,

Elise MARCH 2008 TIKKUN OLAN

Dear Church Family,

How was your day? Today was a "bad parent" day for me. But then, I often use labels like "bad parent," "sloppy worker," or "crummy wife" days. Yes, when it comes to taking guilt trips I must have a very good travel agent.

When I can't sleep at night, the TV in my head is well-stocked with episodes of America's Biggest Mess-ups, starring me. Adulthood has provided a rich mine of regret, remorse, and embarrassment. When the adult memories have been played, I can reach back into my youth for a wealth of other examples. Take the time I forged my father's signature on a test paper (I was in first grade, and I think the "Tom Cunningham" in all printed capital letters probably tipped Sister off). Then there was the eternal fighting with my parents and sisters, so very often instigated by me. I'd bend Father Farriker's ear with an impressive laundry list of sins in the confessional, then promptly go out and do it all again, sometimes starting before I even got out of church.

On other restless nights, as a change of pace from guilty, I just feel sad. Sad that the world is such a mess. Sad that my kids will inherit that mess. Sad that I am so very ill-equipped to do anything much about it.

But I have heard of something beautiful and inspirational, a thought to help banish some of my shadows. It's the Jewish concept of Tikkun Olan. The English translation is "repairing the world." Here is the Jewish legend that inspired Tikkun Olan. It seems that, early in history, something happened to shatter the light of the universe. It broke into millions of pieces, and became millions of sparks living in all of creation. Mankind's great purpose is to look for, and collect, those pieces of light in each corner of the earth. The sparks that dwell in all the people we see, all the people whose lives we touch. In gathering up the light, we each play a part in repairing the world.

Our purpose in life. Every one of us. We can each do our part. In fact, we are called to do our part. We are, it turns out, both capable and qualified. It begins by finding and honoring our own sparks of light from the universe. For me, mine might be found by peeking under the layers of excessive self-criticism (which, after all, is a form of self-pity). And, having found our sparks, we can live into our grand purpose, our divine calling. We can spend our days here searching for light, for goodness: in our families, our friends, our neighbors, and, yes, our enemies.

So, some nights now, when I can't sleep, I think of another image. I see myself, I see all of us, gently gathering up the light around us, fireflies twinkling in the darkness. I see the ball of light growing bigger and bigger with each small, but vital, contribution to the effort. I feel my own inner light growing stronger, illuminating even the darkest corners of my soul. When I think of Tikkun Olan, I feel a new power, the power of a very imperfect child to nevertheless help restore this imperfect world to divine perfection, the shining whole it was meant to be. There is very little room for sadness and self-pity in a life charged with such an important task.

And so, as we look forward to the joyous springtime of the year, let's get busy. All of us, the guilty and sad, the wounding and wounded. There's so much light out there to be found. And we have our job to do. It's time to repair the world.

Love,

Elise FEBRUARY 2008 JOYFUL COOKING

Dear Church Family,

My joy of cooking finally gave out.

Well, not my joy of cooking, but my first copy of *The Joy of Cooking*: the tattered, torn, gravy-splattered Bible of the kitchen. It owed me nothing. After all, I had used it nearly 40 years.

I remember the day I got it, as, of all things, a 10th birthday present. For the record, my other gifts that year were a Polaroid Swinger camera, bright orange fishnet stockings and a very "mod" newsboy cap. Ah, the sixties!

While the other presents came and went, Joy became a cherished friend to this budding chef. I was fascinated by all things culinary, even as a preteen. This is not because I learned the secret of flaky pastry from Mom, or a smooth Hollandaise from Grandma. Au contraire. I come from a line of truly horrendous cooks.

When I was little our family lived in New York City. Nana and Pop Cunningham (Dad's folks) lived just a few blocks away. Every Monday and Thursday Nana would pick me and my sister Maureen up from school and bring us back for dinner at their apartment. That gave Mom a break, and time alone with baby Carolyn. We loved spending evenings with Nana, who spoiled us silly. But dinner at Nana's was, shall we say, an experience. It generally involved "roast" (roast what, we were never quite sure). It arrived on the table still rolled and wrapped in butcher's twine, charred beyond recognition. Several times we ate some of the twine, unable to distinguish it from the meat. Pop was her perfect "other", as he had the original cast iron stomach. Indeed, Pop was partial to breakfasts of cold canned baked beans, strawberry ice cream and 4 or 5 cigars. They were quite a match.

On the home front things were not much rosier. Mom was a militant non-baker, and the TV dinner queen. Vegetables were what you ate on Thanksgiving, if Mom remembered to open the cans. It was, I imagine, with relief that Mom bought the cookbook, and turned the oven over to me.

It was a new day in the Cunningham kitchen. Armed with Joy, I started producing beef Wellington, asparagus amandine and chocolate soufflé. I wasn't really interested in learning scrambled eggs or meat loaf, so typical weeknight dinners ran to Coq au Vin and veal Orloff. Our grocery bill climbed; we all put on weight. But I discovered a love for preparing food that has never left me.

I wish I could say my kids learned flaky pastry and smooth Hollandaise at my knee, but, I confess, I am a kitchen control freak. My secret recipes remain secrets. The boys can cook respectably now, but no thanks to me. How Rosie ended up learning to bake so well is a small miracle.

As I sent *The Joy of Cooking* to the big bookstore in the sky, I found myself saying a little prayer:

Dear Lord,

Thank you for the gift of food, and the gift of delight in its preparation. Remind me to untie my apron strings, and give my family a chance to discover the fun of cooking for themselves. Remind me, too, that food is only a small part of dinner. We are fed, most importantly, by our loving relationship with those who share our meals. I hope, someday, my kids remember my pasta primavera, and me, even a fraction as fondly as I remember Nana's burned toast and Mom's mystery casseroles. And with a fraction of the love I feel when I think of these two, horrendous cooks and wonderful, wonderful women. The joy of cooking is nothing compared to the joy I'll feel when I see them again in Your Kingdom.

Amen.

Love,

Elise JANUARY 2008 ACTING THE PART

Dear Church Family, A couple of years ago, I was strolling on the boardwalk at Rehoboth Beach with the family. I guess my, shall we say, audible voice could be heard above the din of the crowds and Funland rides, because a little one walking a ways behind us caroled out, "Mommy! I hear Snow White!" I felt like quite the celeb, believe me. Angelina Jolie, eat your heart out. Yes, I confess. In my "other life" I am Snow White. In fact, I am a parade of characters, ranging from Robin Hood's deputy to Peter Pan. As an actress in our children's theatre company, Family Stages, my "dress up" urges have been fully satisfied now for 25 years. While I am now not nearly as bouncy as I was in my prime, and my performances are quite rare these days, I can still troupe on when the need arises. I realize that a 51 year old Cinderella requires more than the usual "willing suspension of disbelief", but I retain other skills that serve me well onstage. I may forget to pick up my child at soccer practice, but ask me any line from The Wizard of Oz and memory always serves! Acting is an interesting job. It is a chance to inhabit another body, a different character than your own, make believe (and bring the audience along for the ride). It's a challenge to get there, but in the zone you can really lose yourself in the artificial reality of costumes and set. Scripted dialogue seems just like your own original utterings. Adrenaline enables surprising physical feats on the stage (I once fell and broke my wrist in the middle of a show, finished the whole show, THEN went to the hospital). Of course, there is a danger in the profession of becoming too much of a chameleon, hiding your real self from the world by playing characters, indeed losing touch with who the "real you" might be. But isn't that a danger for us all at times? Isn't it easier to pretend to agree with an opinion we oppose? Don't we waste time just going through the motions of life, mouthing the same dialogue and repeating the same scenes day after day? Haven't we all woken up some mornings and asked ourselves who we really are? If, to quote Shakespeare, "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players", how does that make us feel? Maybe like bad actors, flubbing our lines and missing so many of our cues. Maybe trapped in a role we dislike, in a play we wish we could rewrite. Maybe powerless in the hands of some Great Producer-Director, who knows every step of our choreography before we dance. But there is good news, fellow performers. Perhaps the world can be seen as a stage on which the story of our lives is acted out. But we are free. Free to improvise as much as we like, to revel in the wonder of our being, and our being exactly where we are in time and space. The Lord has given us the reins, and lets us make our own choices every minute of every day. We don't have to be trapped by past behaviors. We don't have to continue to say, and do, and be, things we dislike. We can work on getting things right. And we can also relax and let ourselves flub our lines once in awhile. God never meant for us to savage our own performances like a nasty drama critic. He loves His ragtag band of players. He enjoys watching us live, and grow toward Him like flowers toward the sun, as we age, and learn. Our play can be a glorious collaboration, with our fellow actors and with our God. We can weather the storms and sorrows of Act 2, believing that, when the curtain falls, a heavenly ending awaits. So go on, live your life with all the zest and joy it is in your power to create. Step into the spotlight with confidence, and make your story a beautiful one. It's showtime. Love, Elise

DECEMBER 2007

ON EATING, PRAYING, LOVE AND HAPPYNESS

Dear Church Family,

For the past couple of weeks, I have been reading the huge bestseller by Elizabeth Gilbert, Eat, Pray, Love. It is a collection of 108 stories, the same number as a string of prayer beads, describing Gilbert's incredible journey over the course of one year. Fresh from a painful divorce and long bout of depression, she decides to spend 4 months in each of 3 "countries": Italy, India, and Indonesia, in search of joy and spiritual fulfillment. She studies language with a handsome young Italian, eats and drinks incredible food and wine. She meditates intensely at an ashram in India, fighting fatigue and discouragement until breakthrough moments when she has a transcendent experience of God. She travels last to a healer in beautiful Bali, Indonesia, and there dares to find a way back to love.

Here's a Yuletide announcement. I have had a difficult few years, and I now am planning to spend 2008 following my bliss. I will spend 4 months living in each of 3 places beginning with "K": Kenya, Katmandu and Kalamazoo. I will write about my amazing adventures in the LINK exactly 11 times (the same number as LINKs in a year, coincidentally), and I shall return a happy and spiritually enlightened person. If I think of it, I shall send you a postcard. Just kidding (though I'd love to take a crack at finding the Divine in Kalamazoo). And just jealous. I would love nothing more than to travel the globe like Ms. Gilbert (who actually wrote a terrific book, filled with vivid descriptions, humor and insight).

After reading, it was time for high school movie night. Our film: The Pursuit of Happiness, based on a true story. Chris

Gardner is a down-on-his luck young salesman facing financial disaster, with a young son to raise. He takes a very long shot: an unpaid internship at a huge brokerage firm, with the outside chance of a job there after six months. Those months seem to be a downward spiral: his wife leaves him, he can't make rent payments, and finally he and his boy are living in a homeless shelter. Through it all, Gardner clings to the hope that he can make a good life for his family, that his hard work and tenacity will pay off, that some sunshine will come after so much rain.

Chris's story is inspirational in a very different way than Eat, Pray, Love. But both tales could accurately be described as "the pursuit of happiness". We are dealt such different hands in life. We yearn for different things, have different standards of contentedness. For some, it has to be just about survival. For some, it's about delving deeply into the meaning of our lives. For most of us, it's some of both.

However we define happiness, we are born wanting it.

And here's where I believe God enters in. His is the divine mind that made ours, and He delights in our efforts to experience Him intellectually and spiritually. His are the loving arms there to comfort us, our home when we feel homeless. No matter what curves life throws us, He is the essence of true happiness, and He promises that to us for all Eternity. Whether our earthly reality is like Liz Gilbert's, Chris Gardner's, or somewhere in between, some understanding of His unending love for us is within our grasp. So, this Christmas season, give yourself a gift. Stop chasing happiness. He already caught it, and is offering it to you. Sit down and unwrap the present that has been waiting for you all along. And rest in his Heavenly peace. Merry Christmas. Love, Elise