

60 Years of Teaching



Dr. Rosemarie Deering



Sixty Years of Teaching is a missive written for seekers who embrace the smallest of miracles as part of the universal splendor. Stories of family and students from kindergarten to graduate school are intermingled as a tapestry with wonder as a prism for beauty, truth, and love. Eighty-five years of living the magical and majestic moments of being find the author continuing to celebrate the joy of learning.

Sixty Years of Teaching

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Sixty Years of Teaching:

A Pilgrimage in Honor of Truth

Rosemarie Jacky Deering

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Lovingly dedicated to my three sons:

To Mark whose brief years filled our lives with laughter,
radiance and joy.

And, to Daniel and David, ever faithful, our light in the
darkness of this night as we await the morning.

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Look!
See how delicate this hour
you give to me.

Its tendrils twine about my heart
and touch my cheeks with rose.
They dance in joyful mirth
that brings new thoughts to birth.

How delicate this hour.
How fragile, fresh, and pure.
How loving, how secure.

How delicate this hour.
How magical your power.

A student: Quito, Ecuador 1980

Prologue

This *delicate hour with its magical power* descends softly as flickering candlelight enhances twilight in the shadows of familiar rooms. So too, is this delicate hour of life itself. Life and language are filled with delicacy, the delicacy of old age as well as new births. The delicacy of a cobweb glistening with dew in the morning sunlight. The delicacy of memories like a masterpiece on the canvas of life. Living is necessarily juxtaposed with teaching for we teach who we are as we seek knowledge, wisdom and truth, hoping to transfer a modicum to others. Kind words, tender moments, healing words, moments of sheer beauty often become the memories of life's most precious moments, providing continuity to life, a legacy to oneself. How can a word that touched someone's heart be described adequately...or the sound of children's laughter on Christmas morning? As I record eighty-five years of living, sixty of them as an educator seeking to convey truth, beauty, and love, sometimes hidden from obvious view, my hope is that in this manuscript, the sanctity of life and learning will be revealed in some mysterious way, hidden within the simplicity of words.

How gracious of you to consider these words, carefully chosen as flowers for a friend. I pray they'll be lovely and fragrant, not dull and lifeless.

The worn address book has tear-stained notations of loss: 'address-eternity.' In my romantic world of forever, I entertained laughter, learning, courage and faith, avoiding the chapter called death. Yet we know that death is like the changing of the seasons, deepening evening light bearing the promise of dawn. Now somewhat ruefully, cherished memories and relinquished dreams of long ago prevail over the unknown future. My journey must be an inward pilgrimage. It feels strange to be the oldest of many; though richly blest, I am lonely for what was, for what might have been and for what can never be. Rollo May wrote that if one is honest with herself, she will be lonely because no one else can enter that sacred space. Madeleine L'Engle wrote, "The great thing about getting older is that you don't lose all the other ages you have ever been." Eighty-five years are a gift filled with living: family, friends, students, teaching at home and abroad, laughter and tears. When asked where I worked, I could only answer, "I've never worked. I just go to school! Memories spill over one another with little thought of chronology. My birth year of 1929 is recorded by few faded photographs depicting the austerity in which families survived the flu pandemic, infamous economic depression and ravages of WWI. (Nineteen year-old soldier Carl Jacky who would one day become my father, was the only influenza survivor in his assigned

tent of 1918. (One story is that when he refused to serve spoiled meat to fellow soldiers, he lost his stripes!) Though depression ravished the nation a few years later, we children flourished with little awareness of poverty; we had carefree childhoods with no grandiose expectations. Once in my Easter basket, I found a solid pink rubber ball! What a treasure! Never before nor since have I seen a solid pink rubber ball! Christmas memories of snow blanketing our village encircled by music of a brand new carol: *I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas* (1942), pink angora mittens from my very first boyfriend. (The next day, he demanded them back for another girl.) Grandmother cautiously singing *Silent Night* in German. With WWI a nightmarish memory, Americans of German descent were fearful of discrimination. Mother's eyes would become misty with a far-away look in her eyes as she sang, "So wait and pray each night for me, till we meet again" or "When It's Springtime in the Rockies, I'll be coming back to you." In later years, she described her life as laced with joy intermingled with melancholy, a story waiting to be told, wanting to be persuaded that her life had meaning and purpose. Surely, it can be said that everyone has a story worthy of remembrance. Each is a sacred story even as every individual is a sacred being. A rich historical heritage and a panoply of mosaical memories comprise every life: the unique story of one individual's pilgrimage through the permitted years. Like all stories, mine could fill a book. A book? Where would I begin? What experiences would I include? Which ones would I exclude? There are so many ontological questions, those

mysteries in life for which there are no words. Would one ordinary life warrant a written record? For eight decades, I was a passionate participant in the vibrancy of academic colleagues, challenging students, colorful vocabularies and unbounded ideas. Now I am a pilgrim embarking on a new adventure, wondering if a reflection of those active stewardship years might personalize one teacher's voice and capture a reader's interest. Somewhere I read that a grandmother is really a little girl in wrinkled attire! Yes, there's a little girl inside this aged woman. No matter, my hope is to convey a montage of the years and blessings that reflect joy and pain, a breath of insight, and a glimpse of the Grace so bountifully bestowed.

"Write the words...." The Old Testament words appear boldly as if spoken directly to me. *"Write thee all the words that I have spoken unto thee in a book."*
-Jeremiah 30:2

Might this impetus to write be divine intervention or is it merely hubris? In truth, this story has been writing itself all these years, evidenced by the stacks of notebooks holding recorded vignettes, memorable moments, questions and quotations stashed in drawers awaiting some sort of organization.

*For everything there is a season.....*I have no diapers to change, no papers to grade.....today is the day to begin a new chapter! Isn't it wondrous that for some of us, life permits many chapters? Perhaps a mystery of the unknown is somewhere in this story. Let's turn the pages.

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Clearly, I recall the day when skipping blithely home from school, I began spelling F-I-T-C-H. Suddenly, I could spell and if I could spell, I *knew* I could read! No matter that I had repeatedly heard the Fitch shampoo commercial on the Philco radio that stood proudly in the corner of our humble living room! *I was nine feet tall!* The word Fitch and my only book, *Honey Bear* by Dixie Wilson (1923), were a catalyst for my love affair with words. Over and over, I repeated the flow of the lyrical language: *"There were tangled trees and thickets and a thousand little places where the sky looked through."* One day when I was five years old, a distant great-aunt Nettie whom I never met, thoughtfully sent me a book of poems: *One Hundred Best Poems for Boys and Girls* compiled by Marjorie Barrows (1933). *"Little Orphan Annie's come to our house to stay..... Oh, there once was a puffin....Last night the gypsies came and nobody knows from where....."* The rhythm, the meter, the images transported me to an internal center where my self was nourished. Immured in the magic of words, my personal narrative began to unfold along with mother's bedtime stories of tiny fairies living in a nail hole of the old barn, daylight hours of climbing the hills surrounding Port Allegany to examine early May flowers while imagining I could touch the clouds, days and weeks of retreating to private branches in a gnarled old apple tree to read and read and read, not merely words but the word-sounds that carried me to unknown realms! All the while as life unfolded, profound moments were unknowingly being created, later to be recognized as watershed markers in one person's story.

In 1938, the first piercing and devastating marker was thrust upon our family of four. My only sibling, my little sister was dead! She was beautiful, happy and healthy, only six years old when suddenly she was gone! *I was the sickly one! It must have been my fault.* Alone in personal perplexity and grief, I felt rejected, abandoned, and increasingly introspective, self-critical and responsible for the catastrophe.

Now with seven decades passed, I reflect on the powerful influence of Carolyn's sudden death on my own response to life. I was afraid. After all, if death could pass through a bedroom wall, I could never be safe. My childhood had ended. Never again would I feel adequate or carefree. With my parents in isolated grief, I felt alone to struggle with bombarding, unanswerable questions. Carolyn had been sweet, generous, and adored by everyone. I was the sickly, petulant, angry, and stubborn eight year old. I interpreted the all-encompassing grief as my own personal unworthiness. Why didn't people like me? What was wrong with me? Why had I been the one chosen to live? Though accusing words were never spoken, her death had to have been my fault.

How much of the struggle was self-imposed, matters not. A survivor's personality, character, and life decisions can be unseen components of an earlier tragedy. I had no meta-awareness with which to reflect from an externalized perspective. Invaded by horror and guilt, I was left to sleep alone in the daybed that had served as our bed. Childhood: so brief in chronological time, so profound in influence. Though there is no

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closure for loss of a loved one, time permits a measure of healing, resilience, and the continuance of life such as Monopoly with neighbor-friend Jean or the freedom of racing around town on my beloved green Schwinn with wind blowing through my hair. Books continued to be the safe place where I belonged, where I found escape, hours of wonder and healing while school dragged on, a burden to be borne. Nevertheless, my mother's consistent dream was that I fulfill the college education for which she herself had yearned. Parental sacrifice for three years at Otterbein College opened the world to vistas never imagined. At college, no one knew of our poverty, family disharmony, my shyness, awkwardness, or never-ending grief of the past. The day I realized I could change myself was the day of my rebirth as I returned from class to King Hall where Nita and I shared a room. (Imagine my surprise and delight when Nita called me after sixty years! She cared enough to locate me and call with long-forgotten details of our freshman year together.) How serendipitous is life's timing. While writing these words, news arrived of Dean Van Sant's death. How young she must have been when she listened to my naive and innocent queries 65 years ago! Nita's friendship and the dean's patience bolstered me through the three years needed to complete a degree in English, followed by marriage and childbearing miracles interspersed with sixty years of teaching. Sons, truth-seeking, and teaching became driving passions of my life. Three toddler sons always exuberant with hugs, were skilled with fluent language, imaginative with hand-hewn blocks and cardboard cartons for creative

play. *"And a child shall lead them."* Three gifted sons graciously orchestrated their personal lives with their mother's opening days of elementary school, perhaps intuitively sensing her trepidation in the face of the unknown! September introduced a most magical season. When little David came home from his first day of school, I asked, "How was it?" In a quiet, determined voice he responded, "I'm not going back. They breathed all over me and we didn't read." Despite his protestation, the next day we went to school where he and his friend braced their feet against the bathroom door, refusing to come out. Eventually, I was called from my classroom to employ parental persuasion. Never will a September arrive without the memory of those first glorious autumn days of boys' freshly scrubbed faces wary with reserved anticipation for a new school year, little girls in starched plaid dresses and pinafores; roadside-stands beckoning to customers with resplendent and fragrant fare of red apples and golden cider, the play of light on crimson maple leaves crunching underfoot and an invitational classroom decorated to celebrate the season. Artificial autumn leaves and bittersweet surrounded an oval mirror at just the level for students to see themselves in an aura of multicolored loveliness. Yes, boys sneaked peeks too!

Though now middle-aged, those children will always be young to me. So many years ago...or was it yesterday? The grandmother clock built by son, Dan steadily ticks away the hours as I savor memories. Here is also the homage entitled *You are My Best Friend*, created by Mark to his humbled mother. On the windowsill is David's first stained-glass art in his

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handmade frame positioned beside his first pottery bowl. Artistic sons' personal treasures, the inestimable value cherished by their mother.

Outside the *library* window, the hot desert wind gusts while here on the desk lie long-undisturbed, unorganized bits and snippets of the past. Will anyone be interested in memories of an octogenarian, of school-days beginning more than a half century ago when blackboards were the chief technology? As I reminisce, the words repeat themselves: *"Write the words I have spoken to you..."* So begins this journey of recording a personal pilgrimage: surviving child, student, pilgrim, wife, mother of three sons, elementary school teacher, university educator: forever seeking, yearning, striving for an elusive perfection. With many years behind and few ahead, episodic vignettes present themselves with the caveat that historical context can strengthen tomorrow. The future is built on the past with haunting, painful, and joyous memories that last forever. Within each of us is that child: different ages, sizes, and experiences, learning and stumbling, laughing and sorrowing, hoping and dreaming...we are all teachers, influencing others, moment by moment with our words, attitudes, and actions. Hopefully, these vignettes will somehow reveal the indescribable relationship between personhood and relationships.



In addition to the decades of parenting and teaching, love affair with words, encouragement from colleagues and the Biblical reference, the momentum of this project must surely come from my aesthetic mother's influence. Imagine that little girl in the early years of the twentieth century, sixth of nine children, who marveled at her only Christmas gift of a fresh orange which she held tenderly, stroking the skin's texture, enjoying the smell and anticipation of taste until she finally savored the juicy fruit, the only orange she would have for many months, perhaps a year! Or another Christmas when her one gift was a long-coveted ring. Too large for her finger, it fell irretrievably into the privy! Tears could not bring it back to the broken-hearted little girl but sorrow passed as did the years and at seventeen, Gretchen graduated from high school, a notable accomplishment in 1925. When, like all eight of her siblings, she was considered a nominee for valedictorian, she deliberately let her grades slip; she didn't want anyone one to know she had only that one dress, washed at night, hung by the wood stove to dry, and ironed in the morning to wear five days a week. There could be no special dress for celebration. Nevertheless, following graduation with a small scholarship in hand, at seventeen Gretchen bravely left home to attend one summer session at Pennsylvania Normal School after which she began teaching at Open Brook School, a one-room school for all eight grades. There she trimmed oil lamps, stoked and polished the wood stove, scrubbed the floors and one window as well as the privy, and in an attempt to protect students from the rampant typhoid of that era, urged pupils to bring

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their own cups rather than drinking from a common dipper. Mother was a woman of consequence. Treasured journals of that mystical, insecure country girl are stored here in Dan's handmade cupboard with its replicated chicken-wire doors, revealing much of an idealistic, creative and aesthetic girl. Hopefully, one day there will be a volume of her artistry. Among her papers spanning the years from 1907 to 2002, is the following essay.

November, 1924

I wonder how anyone goes about it to write a life story. I have no definite idea but I have a great big desire for expression. Just to tell why I am so pensive- and- as I am! As far back as I can recall I have been the chief figure in my small drama. The more or less unimportant world has revolved around ME on a pinnacle. Why should it not be so?

Always, it seems, I have wanted to write. Just to be able to sit down and find a flood of words to express the feeling of one's heart. To be able to tell the old, round world why you do a thing. Or why you desire to do it.

Now I'm seventeen. And silly! I have made no friends. Just acquaintances who became interested in me because of some of my ever-lastingly (serious) lines of thought. Except one. I think our English teacher grew to like me. Perhaps he pitied me because I was without an aim. He would do, for me, anything I ask. That is what he told me the last time I saw him.

I wish I could be of some good in this world. Be the girl who can laugh, or who is beautiful or humorous and witty. Or also, be a worker, or famous. Anything to be of some good.

How can one get away from serious stuff? Be lighthearted and happy; and yet look beyond and be something worthwhile too? Aw gee, kid, cut the comedy, won't you?

- Gretchen Marion Fortner 11/03/1907

Now, more than a century later, that same yearning to express something meaningful, *hoping to be of some good*, floods over her daughter. I miss you, mother, as I too wonder how to write a life story. With trepidation, I begin this circuitous journey with the hope that someday a reader may catch a glimpse of inspiration and the breath of sanctity such as you entrusted to me.



Mother used to speak of individuals as wounded: victims of victims, a legacy of woundedness from previous generations, not to be considered as self-pity but rather the natural imperfection of humanity. Thus I am reminded:

1925 You graduated from high school at seventeen, attended one summer of normal school, then began teaching all eight grades in a one-room school, walking miles in snow, rain, and sun of Pennsylvania weather. *Salary \$90 a month.*

1928 You were required to leave teaching: married women were not allowed to teach.

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1928 You rode in the railroad baggage car, accompanying your sister dying from tuberculosis contracted from a patient in town for whom she cared so that she could attend high school.

1929 Married, young and oh so innocent, ten months later you gave birth to your first child.

1932 In abject poverty, you birthed Carolyn who would live only six brief years.

That same year in one moment lacking supervision, I, that first-born, tried to climb a cross-cut saw leaning against a saw-horse. Instead of sliding down its shiny surface, I sliced my arm from wrist to elbow!

1930's You tickled my back to ease the pain of rheumatic fever so I could sleep.

1938 In a moment of exhilaration, you and dad bought the only house you would ever own at a total price of \$1200. Payments of eleven dollars a month required constant sacrifice. Just two months later, Carolyn hemorrhaged to death following a tonsillectomy.

1940's You worked 60-70 hours a week to support us. Here is the expansion bracelet, a locket with mother of pearl on the small heart which opens for a photo. It cost an entire 60 hour week's salary of ten dollars! There never was a photo to fill it.

1950 You gave birth to a son, Robert Carl. I wonder who was most surprised! (My only brother died too soon in 2013.)

1950's When I was devastated during the PhD fiasco, you listened patiently, offering comfort and suggestions.

1970's When I was homesick in California and hospitalized, you prayed for me.

1980's When I felt hopeless and emotionally broken, you assured me I would heal.

1983 Following tumultuous years, you and dad celebrated your fifty-fifth wedding anniversary. *September 8, 1983 you wrote: What a day. Washing on the line. I painted the front of the house white. So nice to be clean. Rosemarie's book, Learning to Love, Loving to Learn came. Read some to Carl...finished, weeping a little. Beautifully stated. I like the restraint. I regret I didn't understand better. So I lost her and Carolyn at the same time. Can't repay kindness. Pass it on.*

1990's When I could no longer care for your physical needs, you acquiesced to 24 hour nursing care, offering me your engagement ring, your only remaining worldly possession.

2000's When dying, you quietly assured me you were ready to meet the Lord.

Months later, I found your note:

Look up, Little One,

Rejoice, for this my the first day with Jesus. You are hurting but G. is safe in the arms of Jesus. Our Lord had G's mansion ready and required her in Glory rather than in Port and she wanted her Lord's will done, nothing more, nothing less. May the Lord bless you and comfort your heart. Lovingly, G.



A brief glimpse of any mother's life reveals an integral part of her child. Joys, grief, sorrow, tears, and regrets become embedded in the child as years quickly slip by. Now here I am deep in rumination, hoping to memorialize a tiny jewel of the past. How does one encapsulate such a treasure?

Might a title for this manuscript pose an invitation to readers? Every book needs a title suggesting a theme.....a thread of continuity.

A Quixotic Quest/ A Sojourner's Staff/A Patchwork Self Stitched with Words/ Pilgrimage to Perfection/ Secure with Insecurity/ Glimpses of Grace/ Self Search

A Sense of Being / If You Don't Publish, You Don't Get to Stay/ Where do I go from Here?

Well, this meandering could go on indefinitely. Such is my habit of beginning over and over, searching for the *right* words, the perfect product, ignoring the law of diminishing returns.

Etymology and epistemology have always driven me onward. As a young person, I repeatedly heard the word perfectionism as meaning excellence. For years I collected articles in which the word perfectionism was used. A few writers would interpret it epistemologically as an impossible expectation but more often, it was used as that excellence toward which everyone should strive. That etymology ultimately became the focus of my

doctoral study during a time when there was nothing to provide criterion validation. Thus I labored over the doctoral dissertation. Inspirational first-son, already *Dr.* David Deering, would encourage my progress, asking if I were getting ready to start to begin to commence. Once he suggested that I could spend the rest of my life on the first sentence. He was right! I had already changed it too many times! Without his encouragement, the Ph.D. would not have happened. Now more than thirty years later, I smile to see evidences of my work used here and there. None of us survives alone. We benefit from those who have gone before, those who guide us along the way and those who inspire us to become our highest selves as do my sons.

Three faithful sons whose very essences bring wonder and joy: David challenges my intellectual self, Daniel strengthens my spiritual faith, and Mark lifts my spirit with hope and joie de vivre.

Life is filled with continuous change, yet bound by the family force of constancy. With love and surely with patience, our family tolerates the energy-draining perfectionism that intrudes upon me while I continually *try* to embrace the imperfections of life as part of its beauty. Ten year old philosophical Mark once told his mamma, "You get to choose happy or sad. I choose happy." One day when I asked how I got so old, philosophical Dan responded, "By waking up every morning." The wisdom of children leads us on the path to wisdom! This compilation of non-sequential memories will be far from perfect! Instead, it will simply

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be shards of living, revered in my treasure box of memories. May it find a home in your heart.





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