

Living By Vows

Robertson McQuilkin

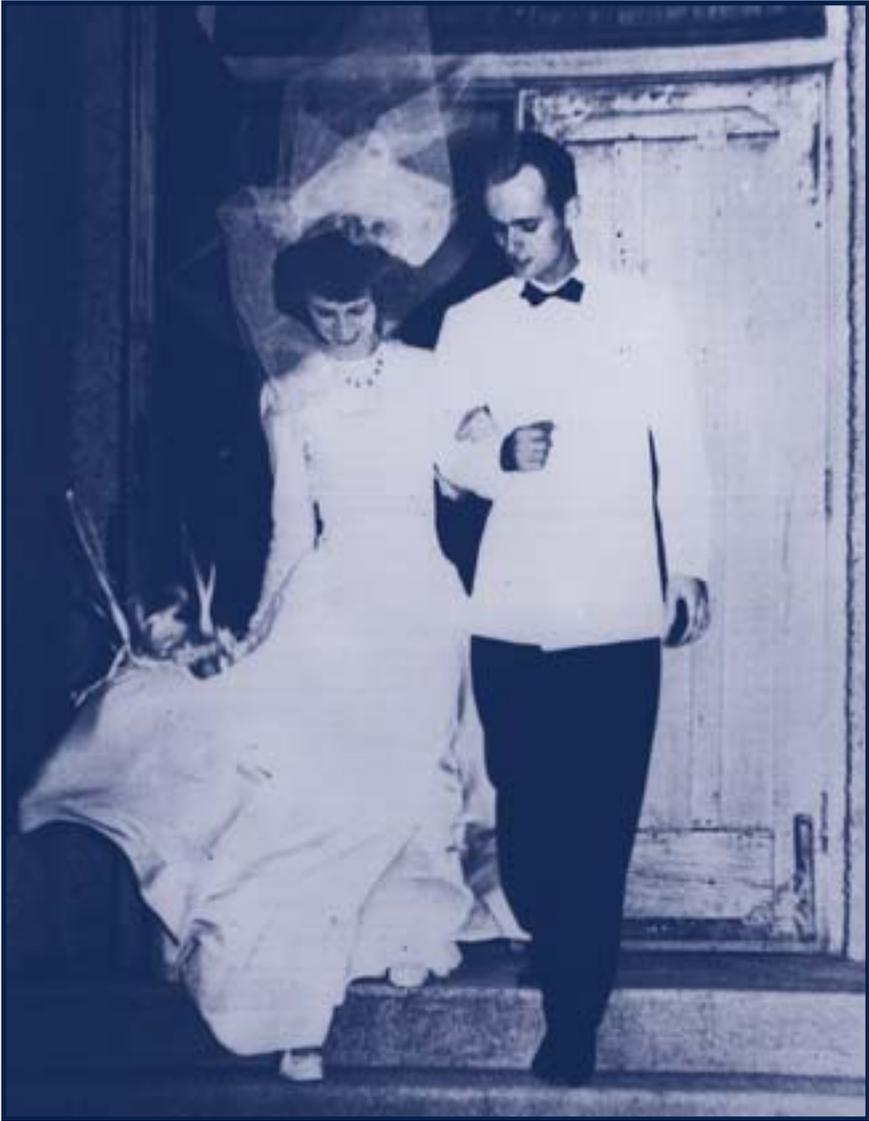
*...to love and
to cherish...
...in sickness
& in health...*

Columbia International University



After his wife was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, Columbia International University President **Robertson McQuilkin** found himself torn between two commitments, two divine callings. At the request of the editors of Christianity Today, Mr. McQuilkin shares his story.

...we would trust the Lord to work a miracle in Muriel if He so desired, or work a miracle in me if He did not.



for better,

It has been a decade since that day, during a Florida vacation, when Muriel, my wife, repeated to the couple we were visiting the story she had told just five minutes earlier. *Funny*, I thought, *that's never happened before*. But it began to happen occasionally.

Three years later, when Muriel was hospitalized for tests on her heart, a young doctor called me aside. "You may need to think about the possibility of Alzheimer's," he said. I was incredulous. *These young doctors are so presumptuous and insensitive*. Muriel was doing the same things she had always done, for the most part. True, we had stopped entertaining in our home—no small loss for the president of a thriving Seminary and Bible College. She was a great cook and hostess, but she was having increasing difficulty planning menus. Family meals she could handle, but with guests we could not risk missing a salad and dessert, for example.

And, yes, she was having uncommon difficulty painting a portrait of me, which the college and seminary board—impressed by her earlier splendid portrait of my predecessor—had requested. But Alzheimer's? While I had barely heard of the dis-

ease, a dread began to lurk around the fringes of my consciousness.

When her memory deteriorated further, we went to Joe Tabor, a neurologist friend, who gave her the full battery of tests and, by elimination, confirmed that she had Alzheimer's. But because she had none of the typical physical deterioration, there was some question. We went to the Duke University Medical Center, believing we should get the best available second opinion. My heart sank as the doctor asked her to name the Gospels and she looked pleadingly at me for help. But she quickly bounced back and laughed at herself. She was a little nervous, perhaps, but nothing was going to get her down.

This time I accepted the verdict. And I determined from the outset not to chase around the country after every new "miracle" treatment we might hear about. Little did I know the day was coming when we would be urged—on average, once a week—to pursue every variety of treatment: vitamins, exorcism, chemicals, this guru, that healer, the other clinic. How could I even look into them all, let alone pursue them? I was grateful to friends who made suggestions, because each was an expression

for worse



*She was disappointed
with each failure
and frustration, but
only momentarily.*



of love. But for us, we would trust the Lord to work a miracle in Muriel if He so desired, or work a miracle in me if He did not.

One day the WMHK station manager, the program manager, and the producer of my wife's morning radio program, "Looking Up," asked for an appointment. I knew an occasional program she had produced was not used, but the response to her monologue of upbeat encouragement continued to be strong. Though the program was designed for women, businessmen often told me how they arranged their morning affairs so they could catch the program.

As the appointment began, the three executives seemed uneasy. After a few false starts, I caught on. They were reluctantly letting me know that an era was ending. Only months before they had talked of national syndication. I tried to help them out. "Are you meeting with me to tell us that Muriel cannot continue?" They seemed relieved that their painful message was out and none of them had to say it. *So, I thought, her public ministry is over.* No more conferences, TV, radio. I should have guessed the time had come.

She did not think so, however.

for rich

She may have lost the radio program, but she insisted on accepting invitations to speak, even though invariably she would come home crushed and bewildered that her train of thought was lost and things did not go well. Gradually, reluctantly, she gave up public ministry.

Still, she could counsel the many young people who sought her out, she could still drive and shop, or write her children. The letters did not always make sense, but then, the children would say, “Mom always was a bit spacy.” She also volunteered to read textbooks for a blind graduate student. The plan was to put them on tape so that others could use them. I was puzzled that those responsible never used them, until it dawned on me that reading and writing were going the way of art and public speaking. She was disappointed with each failure and frustration, but only momentarily. She would bounce back with laughter and have another go at it.

Muriel never knew what was happening to her, though occasionally when there was a reference to Alzheimer’s on TV she would muse aloud, “I wonder if I’ll ever have that?” It did not seem painful for her, but it was a slow dying for me to

watch the vibrant, creative, articulate person I knew and loved gradually dimming out.

I approached the college board of trustees with the need to begin the search for my successor. I told them that when the day came that Muriel needed me full-time, she would have me. I hoped that would not be necessary until I reached retirement, but at 57 it seemed unlikely I could hold on until 65. They should begin to make plans. But they intended for me to stay on forever, I guess, and made no move. *That’s not realistic, and probably not very responsible,* I thought, though I appreciated the affirmation.

So began years of struggle with the question of what should be sacrificed: ministry or caring for Muriel. Should I put the kingdom of God first, “hate” my wife and, for the sake of Christ and the kingdom, arrange for institutionalization? Trusted, lifelong friends—wise and godly—urged me to do this.

“Muriel would become accustomed to the new environment

She is such a delight to me. I don’t have to care for her, I get to.

er, for poorer,

quickly.” Would she? Would anyone love her at all, let alone love her as I do? I had often seen the empty, listless faces of those lined up in wheelchairs along the corridors of such places, waiting, waiting for the fleeting visit of some loved one. In such an environment, Muriel would be tamed only with drugs or bodily restraints, of that I was confident.

People who do not know me well have said, “Well, you always said, ‘God first, family second, ministry third.’” But I never said that. To put God first means that all other responsibilities He gives are first, too. Sorting out responsibilities that seem to conflict, however, is tricky business.

In 1988 we planned our first family reunion since the six children had left home, a week in a mountain retreat. Muriel delighted in her children and grandchildren, and they in her. Banqueting with all those gourmet cooks, making a quilt that pictured our life, scene by scene, playing games, singing, picking wild mountain blueberries was marvelous. We planned it as the celebration of our “fortieth” anniversary, although it was actually the thirty-ninth. We feared that by the fortieth she would no longer know us.

But she still knows us—three years later. She cannot comprehend much, nor express many thoughts, and those not for sure. But she knows whom she loves, and lives in happy oblivion to almost everything else.

She is such a delight to me. I don’t *have* to care for her, I *get* to. One blessing is the way she is teaching me so much—about love, for example, God’s love. She picks flowers outside—anyone’s—and fills the house with them.

Lately she has begun to pick them inside, too. A friend had given us a beautiful Easter lily, two stems with four or five lilies on each, and more to come. One day I came into the kitchen and there on the window sill over the sink was a vase with a stem of lilies in it. I’ve learned to “go with the flow” and not correct irrational behavior. She means no harm and does not understand what should be done, nor would she remember a rebuke. Nevertheless, *I* did the irrational—I told her how disappointed I was, how the lilies would soon die, the buds would never bloom and please do not break off the other stem.

The next day our youngest son, soon to leave for India, came from Houston for his next-to-last visit.

in sickness and

I told Kent of my rebuke of his mother and how bad I felt about it. As we sat on the porch swing, savoring each moment together, his mother came to the door with a gift of love for me: she carefully laid the other stem of lilies on the table with a gentle smile and turned back into the house. I said simply, "Thank you." Kent said, "You're doing better, Dad!"

Muriel cannot speak in sentences now, only in phrases and words, and often words that make little sense: "no" when she means "yes," for example. But she can say one sentence, and she says it often: "I love you."

She not only says it, she acts it. The board arranged for a companion to stay in our home so I could go daily to the office. During those two years it became increasingly difficult to keep Muriel home. As soon as I left, she would take out after me. With me she was content; without me, she was distressed, sometimes terror stricken. The walk to school is a mile round trip. She would make that trip as many as ten times a day. Sometimes at night, when I helped her undress, I found bloody feet. When I told our family doctor, he choked up. "Such love," he said simply. Then



"I have a theory that the characteristics developed across the years come out at times like these."



in health



*Had I not promised,
42 years before, “in
sickness and in health...
till death do us part?”*



after a moment, “I have a theory that the characteristics developed across the years come out at times like these.” I wish I loved God like that—desperate to be near him at all times. Thus she teaches me, day by day.

Friends and family often ask, “How are you doing?” meaning, “How do you feel?” I am at a loss to respond. There is that subterranean grief that will not go away. I feel just as alone as if I had never known her as she was, I suppose, but the loneliness of the night hours comes because I did know her. Do I grieve her loss or mine? Further there is the sorrow that comes from my increasing difficulty in meeting her needs.

But I guess my friends are asking not about her needs, but about mine. Or perhaps they wonder, in the contemporary jargon, how I am “coping,” as they reflect on how the reputed indispensable characteristics of a good marriage have slipped away, one by one.

I came across the common contemporary wisdom in this morning’s newspaper in a letter to a national columnist: “I ended the relationship because it wasn’t meeting my needs,” the writer explained. The counselor’s response

to love a

was predictable: “What were your needs that didn’t get met by him in the relationship? Do you still have these same needs? What would he have to do to fill these needs? Can he do it?” Needs for communication, understanding, affirmation, common interests, sexual fulfillment—the list goes on. If the needs are not met, split. He offered no alternatives.

I once reflected on the eerie irrelevance of every one of those criteria for me. But I am not wired for introspection; I am more oriented outward and toward action and the future. I even feel an occasional surge of exhilaration as I find my present assignment more challenging than running an institution’s complex ministry. Certainly greater creativity and flexibility are needed.

I have long lists of “coping strategies,” which have to be changed weekly, sometimes daily. Grocery shopping together may have been recreation, but it is not so much fun when Muriel begins to load other people’s carts and take off with them, disappearing into the labyrinth of supermarket aisles. Or how do you get a person to eat or take a bath when she steadfastly refuses? It is not like meeting a \$10 million budget or

designing a program to grasp some emerging global opportunity, to be sure. And it is not as public or exhilarating. But it demands greater resources than I could have imagined, and thus highlights more clearly than ever my own inadequacies, as well as provides constant opportunity to draw on our Lord’s vast reservoir of resources.

As she needed more and more of me, I wrestled daily with the question of who gets me full-time—Muriel or Columbia Bible College and Seminary. Dr. Tabor advised me not to make my decision based on my desire to see Muriel stay contented. “Make your plans apart from that question. Whether or not you can be successful in your dreams for the college and seminary or not, I cannot judge, but I can tell you now, you will not be successful with Muriel.”

When the time came, the decision was firm. It took no great calculation. It was a matter of integrity. Had I not promised, 42 years before, “in sickness and in health... till death do us part”?

This was no grim duty to which I was stoically resigned, however. It was only fair. She had, after all, cared for me for almost four decades with marvelous devotion; now it

and to cherish,

was my turn. And such a partner she was! If I took care of her for 40 years, I would never be out of her debt.

But how could I walk away from the responsibility of a ministry God had blessed so remarkably during our 22 years at Columbia Bible College and Seminary?

Not easily. True, many dreams had been fulfilled. But so many dreams were yet on the drawing board. And the peerless team God had brought together—a team not just of top professionals, but of dear friends—how could I bear to leave them? Resignation was painful; but the right path was not difficult to discern. Whatever Columbia needed, it did not need a part-time, distracted leader. It is better to move out and let God designate a leader to step in while the momentum surges.

No, it was not a choice between two loves. Sometimes that kind of choice becomes necessary, but this time responsibilities did not conflict. I suppose responsibilities in the will of God never conflict (though my evaluation of those responsibilities is fallible). Am I making the right choice at the right time in the right way? I hope so. This time it seemed clearly in the

best interest of the ministry for me to step down, even if the board and administrators thought otherwise. Both loves—for Muriel and for Columbia Bible College and Seminary—dictated the same choice. There was no conflict of loves, then, or of obligations.

I have been startled by the response to the announcement of my resignation. Husbands and wives renew marriage vows, pastors tell the story to their congregations. It was a mystery to me, until a distinguished oncologist who lives constantly with dying people told me, “Almost all women stand by their men; very few men stand by their women.” Perhaps people sensed this contemporary tragedy and somehow were helped by a simple choice I considered the only option.

It is all more than keeping promises and being fair, however. As I watch her brave descent into oblivion, Muriel is the joy of my life. Daily I discern new manifestations of the kind of person she is, the wife I always loved. I also see fresh manifestations of God’s love—the God I long to love more fully.

till death

*“Almost all women stand by their men;
very few men stand by their women.”*

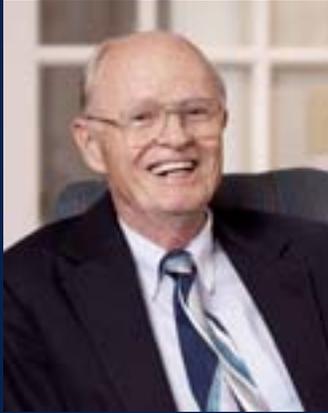


do us part.



During the summer of 2003, Muriel failed rapidly, and in the early morning of Saturday, September 20, as I cradled her in my arms, she quietly slipped away. She had finished her journey of 25 years into the darkness of Alzheimer's and now was free and fulfilled in the bright presence of the One whom she loved so well, for so long. A sweet, sad chapter of my life had been gently closed by a loving Father.

A more detailed account of the McQuilkins' story is available in Dr. McQuilkin's book, *A Promise Kept: The Story of an Unforgettable Love* (Tyndale House, 1998).



Robertson McQuilkin served for 22 years as president of Columbia International University (formerly Columbia Bible College and Seminary) until his resignation in 1990 to care for his wife, Muriel, who had reached the stage of Alzheimer's Disease in which she needed full-time care.

McQuilkin's writing has appeared in numerous journals and periodicals. Among the books he has authored are *Life in the Spirit* (LifeWay, 1997, Broadman, 2000), *A Promise Kept* (Tyndale, 1998), *An Introduction to Biblical Ethics* (Tyndale, 1989, 1995), *Understanding and Applying the Bible* (Moody, 1983, 1992), and *The Great Omission* (Baker, 1984, OMLit 2001). He engages in an extensive speaking ministry in churches, schools and conferences across America and overseas.

Columbia International University

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7435 Monticello Rd. • P.O. Box 3122 • Columbia, SC 29230-3122
803-754-4100 • Toll Free 1-800-777-2227 • www.ciu.edu

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