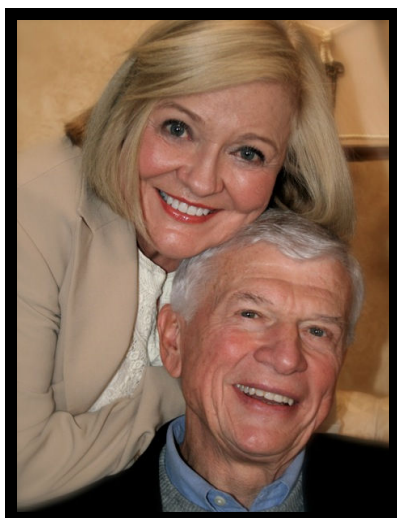


The Journey to Wholeness in Christ

Ministry founded and led by Conlee and Signa Bodishbaugh



Memories and Thanksgivings

Under the Beach Umbrella

by Signa Bodishbaugh

Every year our family goes to the beach. It's a wonderful ritual and we have done it for over forty summers. We have celebrated many rites of passage at the beach. Lost teeth, first steps, first love, and this summer, celebrating the passage of oldest BodishBabe (grandchild) to college this fall. There are several "givens" I look forward to personally enjoy each summer: sharing family stories, cooking good food, sitting for long hours around a huge table (this year there were 16!) and reading a great beach book under a big umbrella right at the surf. This year I brought "the book" with me, ready to dive in the first morning. But there in the beach house was

a book I hadn't read that seemed to be calling my name and screaming, "Read me! Read me!" So I picked up *The Help*, a novel by Kathryn Stockett. Two days and 451 pages later I was undone.

When I first heard about this book a year or two ago, I hoped it would possibly be about "help" in the Biblical sense. I did a study once on the word used for "help" in the Bible. It is the Hebrew word *etzer* which means one who comes alongside you to do for you what you cannot do for yourself. It is used to describe the woman for the man in Genesis Two. He cannot fulfill the first great commission by himself (to multiply and fill the earth). To accomplish this commandment he needs the woman. She, with him, accomplish what he cannot do alone. *Etzer* is the word used by God to say that He is our very present help in times of trouble. He comes alongside us to do for us what we cannot do alone. Into the first chapter or so of *The Help*, I thought this book was going to be very different from my Biblical studies but actually it is not. It describes exactly an *etzer* kind of relationship, just in a surprising way. Reading the novel and digest-

ing it, has provoked lots of memories and thanksgivings.

The Help is a poignant account of life in the south in the sixties from the thoughts and mouths of black maids who worked for white women in Jackson, Mississippi. Ms Stockett nailed the southern dialect, both black and white, which is unbelievably hard to do with accuracy and integrity. I kept thinking as I read, *This should be read aloud. It's that good.* In fact, I often interrupted Conlee's own beach reading to share passages with him. I loved Aibileen and Minnie, the two maids. I knew them – from the story, but also from my past. The one white woman's voice in the novel is Skeeter. Her life and mine were on parallel tracks in many ways. Besides being the same age in the 60's, we were both questioning the status quo, painfully seeing the inequalities, yet bound up in tradition, and rebelling within while outwardly "reading the script."

A big difference between us is that in the novel, Skeeter finds her voice while still in the midst of the system. I didn't. I admired her cour-

age and her determination. It cost her all her friends, her reputation, and her pre-determined future. But you cheer her on as you read. I often found myself thinking, *I wish I had spoken up, asked the questions, pressed through, resisted the pre-determined shaping from my parents and peers.*

But then I realized that though I caved in many times in my young adult life through weakness and fear, God never gave up on me. In His way and His time, He strengthened my weak parts, gave me a voice and empowered me to speak truth. It just happened in a way and at a time I didn't expect or plan. In fact, when I was living through *The Help* in my life, I didn't even know Him. Just another example of how He does for me what I cannot do for myself. How He knows my heart better than I do. How He hears every inner cry of my heart even when I do not know how to cry out.

Sitting in a big semi-circle of umbrellas and beach chairs at the Gulf this summer, watching children and grandchildren digging holes, making sand castles and chasing waves, I shared some stories with my daughters-in-law from my youth, inspired by my beach book. When they had expressions of disbelief on their faces, I realized what an incredible journey I have traveled in my lifetime. We often speak of how things have gotten so much worse in just one generation (morality, ethics, God-consciousness, etc.) but I realize, too, how much improvement there has been. Many attitudes that once seemed indelibly etched in our souls now seem repulsive and even painful to recall.

For me, Aibileen and Minnie from *The Help* were wrapped up in one tiny wizened woman whom I'm sure never weighed a hundred pounds in her life. I only knew her as Aunt Sissie. I don't know who named her that or, regrettably, what her given name was. I never asked. As long as I could remember she was very old. She had worked for my mother's family all her life. At age 12, she had gone to be a lady's maid, cleaning up in the kitchen for her mother who was the cook, then graduating to the bathrooms, the bedrooms, and eventually, at her mother's passing, to running the household. She was a fixture at every meal and every important family occasion. As a child I thought every family had its own version of an Aunt Sissie. Otherwise, how would they function? The women in



my

mother's family didn't seem to know how to cook or clean or iron until after Aunt Sissy passed.

All my memories of Aunt Sissie were of her latter years. She was bent over and slowly shuffled her feet along as if walking was painful. She must have had severe arthritis but I never heard her complain once. For hours she would stand at the ironing board she set up in the kitchen late in the afternoon so she could listen to her stories on the radio while she worked. It was a silent ritual I loved to watch. The clothes to be ironed had been washed, boiled in starch, dried, sprinkled with water from a clean Coca Cola bottle, folded tightly into a pillow case and put in the ice box that morning. After the kitchen was cleaned from lunch, the floor mopped and she had eaten her lunch alone using the special dish, glass and silverware kept on her special shelf, the ironing began. First she took two black licorice Sen-Sen drops from a little tin she kept in her pocket, put them under her tongue and sucked on them the whole time, making loud suction noises. For years I thought Sen-Sen was made just for ironing ladies. Then she took the first cold garment out of the ice box, flattened it out, placed her damp ironing rag on top, spit on the iron to see if just the right amount of steam came forth, and did her magic. She could turn a cold, wet, compressed dress shirt into a work of art in no time.

After her story was over on the radio she would answer my tirade of questions. *Tell me stories about when you were a little girl.* The one that amazed me most was hearing about her going to the Sunday afternoon hangings on the courthouse lawn where Judge Isaac Parker, the "hanging judge" would sentence 1-6 criminals to their death in the frontier town of Fort Smith. Her family would take a picnic to eat on the ground with the other colored families after church to watch the activities. She would relate the most grotesque details of the events and of

course I was fascinated. My parents always whispered or spelled when anything the least bit salacious was discussed in my presence. But Aunt Sissie minced no details about anything.

Things about my family members that she would never discuss with my mother were told with great relish to me. When I mentioned at dinner one night that my Aunt Ethel had been jilted by a suitor before she married my Uncle Guy, my mother demanded to know where I heard that. I told her I got the information from Aunt Sissie and she immediately forbade me to spend any



more alone time with her. Of course I ignored this command but learned quickly to keep these tidbits to myself. Many things about my family were not discussed in my presence. "Little pitchers have big ears!" So, much of what I know today about my family I learned at Aunt Sissie's ironing board.

There was a great mystery about Aunt Sissie that no one would tell me about. I never met her husband. I was told he died but Aunt Sissie wouldn't confirm or deny that. She had a daughter I only met once. Her name was Doll Baby. She was exotic and exciting to me and I loved hearing stories about her. She had moved to New York, had a job in a big office, wore beautiful suits to work, had her hair straightened, and lived a fabulously exciting life. Aunt Sissie would tell me all the details about the fancy places Doll Baby went to, things she ate I never heard of, and famous people she saw in New York City. I longed to know more about her but she remained illusive until she came home one day with a baby, left her with Aunt Sissie, and returned to the city. I don't think she was ever heard from again. It turned out that Doll Baby was Aunt Sissie's grand-daughter and the little girl she left for Aunt Sissie to raise was the great grandchild.

No question of mine was too foolish or off-limits for Aunt Sissie. She would start laughing at long-forgotten incidents of her life and my family's life and laugh so hard she'd get choked and have a coughing fit. But the stories that followed

those fits would entertain me for hours. There were times when I would love her so much I would rub my hands over her ashy black skin and then rub my own arms, hoping it would rub off on me and I could be just like her.

Aunt Sissie lived in a project with her great grand-daughter. One of her neighbors cared for the child while she worked at our house. Only on Christmas did we ever go to her house. My mother and I would load up the car with Christmas presents and drive to a part of town I only saw once a year. It was a maze of curved streets and look-alike cinder block houses. Her house had the lawn furniture on the little front porch that used to be on our back patio. That's how we could find it. We went inside after my mother drilled me in the car. "Don't touch anything. Don't drink anything if she offers you something. Don't eat anything. Don't use the bathroom." Why did I never ask why? I wondered why, but I never questioned my mother. As soon as we would leave and get to a respectable filling station we would stop and my mother would take me to the ladies' room to wash my hands with soap and hot water. Why did I never ask why? I wondered why.

Maybe because when I was five or six years old my mother, dressed in her high heels, her little veiled hat and her white gloves took me downtown to Kress Five and Dime Store. While she was shopping I wanted a drink from the water fountain I spotted in the back of the store. As she purchased her Maybelline products I got myself a drink and suddenly, much to my surprise, I was getting the worst spanking of my life in front of everyone. I had drunk from the "Colored" fountain instead of the "White" fountain. I didn't know I had done it. I didn't know why it was such a bad thing to do. But I didn't do it again.

As I got older and bolder I did begin to ask questions of my parents. "Why does Aunt Sissie cook our food, wash our dishes, iron our clothes, clean our house but isn't allowed to eat at our table, or eat from our dishes?" The long parental finger was pointed in my face and I was told to keep my questions to myself or I would face the consequences. I didn't know what the consequences were but I surely didn't want to find out. I learned to keep my mouth shut but I thought things. Things like: *If Aunt Sissie is so loving to me, will listen to me when no one else will, and will talk to me like I'm her equal, I want to get to*

know some other colored people. (When I was a child it was considered insulting to say “black,” but “colored” was considered to be the respectable term and the one she used to describe herself. Of course there were other terms much more degrading that were used frequently. And no one ever heard the term “African-American”). I realized that I was beginning to love colored people with an inordinate, inexplicable love. I longed to join them when I saw a group of maids at the bus stop. I would initiate conversations with colored men and women I didn’t know when I was out with my mother. She was horrified and would jerk me away. They would look just as horrified for other reasons. Would they be blamed for something they didn’t do?

My mother began to say to me things like, “How did I ever have a child like you? Where did you get all these odd ideas? Just accept things as they are! You can’t change things!”

Teachers and friends were no help either. They thought my ideas were odd and even dangerous. I was constantly conditioned to keep my thoughts to myself and play the game of the South.

Unlike Skeeter in *The Help* I was a coward.

Aunt Sissie died sometime while I was in college. My mother learned to clean with a vengeance as though her worth depended on it. She ironed and she cooked, although we never ate like we used to. Now we had TV dinners and instant mashed potatoes, rice and grits. Vegetables were heated from cans and bread and desserts were bought at the bakery. It was called progress. It took the place of The Help.

I reminisce and share this with you because I

want you to see some of the people from my past who helped shape who I am today. But this isn’t just about me. Who in your past molded you and directed you away from the current flow of the world you grew up in? Who spent time with you? Listened to you? Told you that you could succeed? Encouraged and cheered you on?

I spent a time this morning giving God thanks for Aunt Sissie and others who treated me with respect and of equal value. When they did, it was reciprocal. I didn’t begin to love black people because they were underprivileged, discriminated against or persecuted. I loved them because one old black woman took the time to tell me I was loveable, I mattered, I had opinions she would listen to, and I could do things even Doll Baby had not done. This accomplished more in my life than all the civil rights marches, equality talks and legislation, than Dr. Martin Luther King, or the guilt about political correctness. It isn’t about doing the right things on the outside and yet harboring the old discriminatory feelings inside. It is about a God change inside-out. It is the kind of change that goes against established family values and traditions, the status quo of society and the risk of being ridiculed.

God changed me by love! By His love and by the love of others. Who is loving you? Who are you loving? Be strong! Be courageous! Ask the questions! Think outside your box! Let God enlarge your world and change it with your determination to be real for Him!

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In his heart a man plans his course, but the LORD determines his steps. Proverbs 16:9

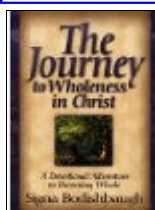
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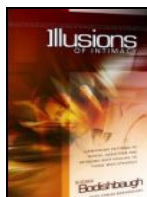
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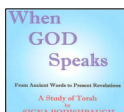
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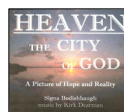
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