

# Ordinary Saints

by Christa von Zychlin



Oriet in 2004, the year of the stroke.

**“I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers.”** EPHESIANS 1:15

One thing my neighbor Barbara LeMond wants me to get straight is that she is not some kind of extraordinary saint for taking care of her comatose mother these past four years. “Sometimes you just do what you have to do,” she says. Okay, that’s a relief to me. I don’t have an *extraordinary* saint as a neighbor, just an *ordinary* one.

As I wonder aloud whether she sometimes gets angry at God for having handed her what I would call a tough assignment, Barbara takes a moment to reflect before she responds. “Not really. I just don’t look at it that way. I think these experiences make you who you are. This is how life is.”

She does admit, “Of course, I never would have chosen it.”

Feeding your mom every four hours, like a baby?

She smiles at the incongruity, but there’s also a tenderness. “Yes, like a baby.”

And Mother’s Day, what’s that like for you?

She hesitates. “It’s just another day. Except that Lon (the family’s

domestic helper) brought us both flowers.” She smiles again. “Lon is the real saint in this story.”

## Oriet was a good mother

Barbara’s grandmother had come from a Swedish immigrant family and worked as a seamstress in Minneapolis. She had a wonderful colleague and beloved friend named Oriet. So when she had her first daughter, she gave the baby that name too.

Oriet spent almost her whole life in North Minneapolis. She married a man from the same area. He soon went off to war (World War II), however, and came back a different person. They tried to make a go of it, but the marriage ended in divorce when their only daughter, Barbara, was two.

Oriet worked hard, providing for her daughter as a single mother. She loved reading Barbara bedtime stories, continuing long after the girl could read for herself. There were shopping trips to the city, angel food cakes for birthdays, and day-to-day loving care.

After Barbara became a mother herself, Oriet always sent her Mother's Day cards. The grandkids got letters and checks on their birthdays. Oriet made a "Grandma

"It was a huge change for Mom," Barb said. "She was just so lonely."

As so many family members of people with dementia can testify, the changes come in stages.

ing change for fees and tips, and choosing the right clothes, once she got on the course, instinct took over. Same for church. She went regularly, and it seems few people

*Oriet in Hong Kong sometime between 2001 and 2004.*



Book" for her grandchildren, filled with her memories of growing up in the 1920s and '30s.

### *The changes came in stages*

Barbara can practically pinpoint the day her mother's dementia began. It was right around her 75th birthday. First, Oriet's friend of several decades moved away, devastating her. Then, Barbara and her family renewed their commitment to serve as ELCA missionaries in Hong Kong. John, Barb's husband, is a professor at the Lutheran Theological Seminary and the Tao Fung Shan Christian Centre, and Barb teaches middle-school children at the Hong Kong International School.

First, there was an accumulation of junk mail. Oriet was spending all kinds of time and money on sweepstakes and other offers. One day she phoned Barbara in Hong Kong in a frenzy because she had lost a thousand-dollar check. It was the first time she had ever begged Barbara to come home, which she did. Two weeks of sorting and sifting produced the check and several other misplaced items. Oriet had always been so careful about finances, but now . . . "We were far away," says Barb. "We didn't know what was going on."

Oriet still played golf three times a week. Even though she had difficulty organizing her clubs, find-

ing change for fees and tips, and choosing the right clothes, once she got on the course, instinct took over. Same for church. She went regularly, and it seems few people

had any idea how confused life had gotten for her. When she'd get lost going to her bridge club, she'd stop a policeman to ask for directions. One day she lost her car, forgetting that she had walked home and left it parked at her apartment complex clubhouse.

Then Oriet's friends began calling Barbara in Hong Kong to express their concern. After a fire in the apartment, even her landlady recommended that Oriet should live someplace with more supervision.

### *Oriet moves to Hong Kong*

Barb and John decided to move Oriet to their home in Hong Kong, where she had visited several times.

But this time it was different. After arriving, she didn't sleep for 48 hours, a problem they discovered is called night wandering in dementia patients. "John and I almost went crazy," Barbara shakes her head.

A few nights later, Oriet put cooking oil in the teakettle and heated it up to warm herself. Then she said she wanted to go home, and when they asked her where that was, she gave the address of her childhood home—65 years ago.

Sometimes Barb's teenagers got frustrated at their grandmother for forgetting who they were. Sometimes, it hurt their feelings.

Some things were sort of funny.

Oriet would go into the living room several times in the same hour asking brightly, "Is there any coffee? Are there any cookies?" "You already had cookies, Mom," was Barbara's patient response. "Well, I most certainly did not," she'd answer. "I would certainly know if I had cookies."

Then came the massive stroke, which left her totally silent.

### She was stable

On September 18, 2004, Barbara went in to her mother's room to wake her and found her on the floor, unconscious. She could feel a pulse, but her mother was unresponsive. An ambulance arrived minutes after Barbara called. Oriet had suffered a massive stroke.

"I was prepared to watch her die that weekend," Barbara said. "But within hours, the ventilator was removed from her throat, and her heart and lungs were working on their own." She was stable.

"As I sat in the hospital, holding her hand, I thought back to stories I had heard when I was growing up," Barbara said. Her mother had been near death before, after contracting pneumonia at age 24. "She said that her mother's warm hand was the only thing that had kept her alive. I wondered if the limp hand I held had any feeling in it," Barb said. "It certainly didn't appear to have any life force."

Oriet survived that weekend and the next. The days and weeks flowed together. "On my birthday, six weeks later, holding her hand, I reminded her that 52 years earlier she had given birth to a daughter—me. She squeezed my hand. It was the first response in those long weeks of vigil, and I knew that my mother would live."

### Five years later

The LeMond household begins before dawn. John and Barbara do the first feeding together, before they go off to work, leaving their helper Lon in charge.

"I'm just doing what anybody would do," Barbara says. "In Hong Kong, it is customary for families to care for their elderly."

Again, she calls "gentle" Lon the real saint in the story.

When they were in the hospital with Oriet after her stroke, Lon came to visit all the time. "Don't worry, I'll take care of Mom Oriet when she comes home," he said. Lon had cared for his invalid grandparents back home in the Philippines. He now treats Oriet like his own grandmother.

Before Oriet left the hospital, John, Barbara, and Lon were all carefully trained: bathing, hair care, tube feeding, diapers. Oriet is turned at every feeding. She gets a sponge bath three times a week. A health aide comes twice a week, for exercise, and to check Oriet's vital signs and temperatures. A nurse comes to change the feeding tube once a month.

### Ordinary or extraordinary?

"I feel I'm doing the right thing," says Barbara. "It's good knowing she's so stable. Not one bed sore. Although . . ." she hesitates. "We found Mom's living will where she said a vegetative state would be a life not worth living. But we aren't taking any extraordinary measures."

All of this has widened Barbara's perspective on relationships.

"It's not a matter of making her happy," says Barbara. "Before the stroke I could do that. Every Saturday we'd go get her hair done and have lunch. She would be . . ."

Barbara starts to laugh, “she would be clueless about where we were. ‘What part of Minneapolis is this?’ Then she’d say, ‘I must be on Plymouth Avenue. I haven’t been here for a while.’

“There are Chinese neon signs everywhere, loud conversations going on in Cantonese, and sidewalk shops selling pig entrails and big bundles of dried fish, but Mom had no idea. She just thought she was in a part of Minneapolis she hadn’t visited in a while.” Oriet clearly enjoyed these outings.

Now, though, never a response. Barbara tells how her mother used to love to sing, how she was in the glee club in high school and in the church choir for many years.

About a year ago, there were some Swedish guests visiting Hong

Kong, and when they heard about Oriet, they came and sang a children’s hymn for her. After just a moment of singing, tears trickled down her cheeks.

She still hears music.

There have been other saints involved with Oriet. An American seminary professor carefully reintroduced himself each time he saw her at church. “Hi, my name is Jim,” he’d say, allowing her the dignity and respect of knowing who he was.

Then there was Mary, the colleague from Barb’s school who celebrated her own 50th birthday by coming to stay with Oriet so that John and Barbara could have a weekend away. “Saint” Mary played the harp and piano that weekend for Oriet’s listening pleasure.

“The doctor said she wouldn’t

live,” Barbara says. “I don’t know, she’s looking pretty good. I think she might outlast all of us.”

But now it’s late. Time to do the evening feeding. Then Barbara needs to get to bed for a full day at her school tomorrow. And John has meetings with students at the Lutheran seminary and the Tao Fung Shan Christian Centre. Lon will come to give Oriet her night feeding.

They are just doing what they’ve been called to do. The ministry of ordinary saints. 🌸

**The Rev. Christa von Zychlin** moved from the United States to Hong Kong where she is studying Chinese, teaching toddlers to read, and occasionally preaching in local congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Hong Kong. You can read more about her adventures at <http://marathonangel.blogspot.com>.

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