

KEEP ETERNITY BEFORE *the* EYES *of the* CHILDREN



*What does it mean to be saved? It means eternal living here and now;
a life of interaction with Jesus here and now, and that is the only
description of Eternal Life in the New Testament, John 17:3.*

DALLAS WILLARD, "THE GOSPEL OF THE KINGDOM"

*M*aymie stood up in the overstuffed hay wagon as it bounced over the rocky ground of the Willard farm on Greasy Creek. She was wearied by her life as a farmer's wife. The work was unending and often seemed unrewarding. Her three oldest children were scattered about the farm doing chores or homework, her youngest toddled around under his siblings' watchful eyes.

Maymie and her husband, Albert, were hauling fodder and feeling the deep chill of winter in the air. But even in late January, the work continued, the cows still had to be fed.

Maymie was trying to keep warm as she helped with the fodder. But then a terrible sensation, the mountain of hay began to shift under her feet and started to slide. She felt herself losing her footing and in a split second weighed her choices. She jumped from the wagon. Maymie's leap

and resulting fall dramatically changed the course of her life and each member of her family, especially the life of her youngest son, Dallas Albert Willard.



In the 1930s America and other parts of the world suffered through the Great Depression. Missouri was hit particularly hard. For farmers on the rolling and rocky plains of the “Show Me State,” the decade was not only depressed, it was also dark and dirty. The bottom of the Dust Bowl was in the neighboring states of Oklahoma and Texas, but Missouri farmers felt the impact of being on its rim. Farm production was curtailed by the economic crash and choked almost lifeless by dust bowl conditions.

In 1933 the situation became even worse. First, the chinch bugs invaded and ate their way through the crops. “The bugs would clean up the wheat if they could find it,” one farmer recalled. “Then they would head for the oats. When the oats were gone, they would finish up the corn.”¹

The drought of 1934 was so severe some farmers fed their cows leaves from the trees because they were the only thing left that had some semblance of green. In 1935 the problem was too much rain. In 1936 the grasshoppers moved in—mostly in the northeastern part of the state. The “plagues” in Missouri were reaching biblical proportions.

And in the middle of this depressed decade Dallas Albert Willard was born, on September 4, 1935. His first name was taken from the county of his birth, Dallas County, Missouri, which was originally organized under the name *Niangua* in 1841. The word *Niangua* is from an old Native American phrase meaning “I won’t go away.”² But during the early years of his life, the people Dallas loved very often went away. The loving embrace of his mother would be felt only for a brief season.

Dallas’s middle name was taken from his father, Albert Alfred Willard. Albert was the third child and first son of Joseph M. Willard and Susan Rhoda Spurlock. “Grandpa Joe” was a circuit-riding Methodist evangelist who had met Rhoda on one of his preaching tours into northern Arkansas. Apparently when he sang “Just as I Am,” Rhoda responded with a yes to both Joseph and Jesus.

Albert was born on March 12, 1894, on a farm near the small village of Rover, in Oregon County, Missouri. He was one of what would become over

one hundred first cousins. The Willards and Spurlocks were fruitful and multiplying clans.

The Willards trace their lineage back from Joseph Willard through eighteenth-century farms in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia, and possibly further back to Simon Willard, who lived in the county of Kent in England in the early 1600s.

Dallas's Willard ancestors founded the town of Concord, Massachusetts, served as an acting president of Harvard College, and condemned the Salem Witch trials. A direct ancestor, Dallas's great-great grandfather Martin Willard split some rails by the side of a young Abe Lincoln.³ The same preacher who married Abe's sister, Sarah, married Martin's brother, James Willard. It is likely that James Willard attended the same church, Little Pigeon Baptist, as the Lincoln family.

Not much changed across the next three generations. Dallas's father, Albert, grew up on his parent's farm near Rover, Missouri, attended small country churches, and experienced the harsh realities of life.

In 1914, at age twenty, Albert moved north to Douglas County, Missouri, near the town of Ava, to care for his great aunt Polly (Willard) and her husband Nate Lowe. The Lowes had no children and promised Albert an economic leg up: they would give Albert their land and log cabin if he would take care of them.⁴ While he was in that community, he began attending Bethany Baptist Church and met his future wife, Maymie Joyce Lindesmith.

Perhaps they first met before seeing each other in church. Nate and Polly's farm bordered the Lindesmith farm. Albert had the habit of singing while working in the fields. It is nice to imagine that Maymie may have heard his strong bass voice singing his favorite song, "Poor Wayfaring Stranger," as the notes drifted across on the wind.

Several years later Albert and Maymie became an attractive couple. He was tall and square-jawed with thick, dark hair he managed with a straight-line part and tug from left to right. His eyes flashed intelligence and trust. Maymie was also tall. Of German ancestry, she had dark hair that framed a face with eyes that were round and inquisitive. She had a passion to absorb life and then turn her experiences into words. She came from a family of educators and would soon become a teacher herself. She was already an aspiring writer.

On July 25, 1918, before marrying Maymie, Albert enlisted in the Army. He could have received an exemption since he was the caretaker

for Polly and Nate Lowe. However, Maymie's former boyfriend at the time reported to the draft board that Albert had not registered. So Albert was called into service.

Clearly Maymie's other suitor had some reason for hoping that the on-again, off-again relationship between Albert and Maymie could be turned off permanently by Albert's absence. In a letter from Bessie Cunningham to Albert's younger brother, Arthur, Ms. Cunningham wrote, "Maymie was here



Albert and Maymie Willard

this evening. I believe she and Albert are still at 'outs,' but I think it will come out all right."

Albert went off to war and became a mechanic, an automotive maintenance specialist, with the 10th Division. But he finished his basic training just a few days before the armistice was signed on November 11, 1918.

Albert enjoyed writing, and later in life was known for his dramatic recitations of

poems he and others had written. The last stanza of his "Poem from World War I" reveals some of his humor.

Well, I guess we were the luckiest guys that ever started out,
for when we left Camp Funston, 'twas to get the Sour Krouts
and I'm sure we bluffed the laddies, for we didn't fire a gun
and now the war is over and I didn't get a hun.⁵

His division completed a mopping up tour of duty in France in 1919. And things turned out well for Maymie and him. On October 10, 1919, the couple was definitely at "ins." They eloped.

Maymie was living away from home in a boarding house while teaching in a nearby town. On the first weekend in October 1919 she went home to visit her parents. Early Monday morning, October 6, her sister Eva took her back to Round Lake, riding double on a horse so that Eva could take the horse back home. Before leaving Eva, Maymie had given her younger sister

a note to give to their parents. She told Eva, “Albert will be picking me up on Friday and we’re going to get married.” Maymie was not old enough to marry without her parent’s consent, so she wrote her own permission.

Albert and Maymie were married the following weekend. The couple was soon back in church to face the congregation, Maymie’s parents—and possibly her scorned ex-boyfriend—as husband and wife. Albert was twenty-five and Maymie seventeen.

THE WRITING BUG

Albert and Maymie lived in Douglas County for the next few years, during which time their first child, Joseph Ira (known as J. I., after both grandfathers),⁶ was born. In 1924 the young family moved to Long Lane in Dallas County, where Maymie taught in a nearby school and Albert worked as a salesman.



Maymie in 1919

In 1926 the family of three moved to the small town of Buffalo, Dallas County. The town was deeply in debt. After the Civil War, Buffalo had taken on almost \$250,000 in bond debt in hopes of luring a railroad that never came, and it struggled for decades under the weight of that debt.⁷ But even without a notable industry or railroad, there were enough seed mills, grocery and dry goods stores, stables, and blacksmiths to provide for the material needs of the surrounding farms. And there were also four churches to provide for the souls of the people.

The move to Buffalo may have been a concession to Maymie. She was outgoing, determined, and perhaps even more of an extrovert than Albert. One family member described her as “a shaker and a mover,” making quick impressions and becoming very popular.⁸ Given her family’s relatively affluent background, she was more likely at home in town than in the country. They moved into a house in town. It was modest in size but featured a large front porch. Their business, a dry goods store, and their new church were just a few blocks away from their front door.

But the Willards’ time in town was short-lived. In June of 1929 Albert traded the house in town for a farm a few miles south of Buffalo, near Red Top, on Greasy Creek. (It is not known why the creek was named Greasy,

but many churches in the area, including First Baptist of Buffalo, used it for baptisms; so perhaps it was all the washed away sins that gave the creek its name.)

Why did Albert move? Maybe he had seen some of the warning signs of what would become the Great Depression. Perhaps he even foresaw the oncoming storm of financial problems and wanted to get some land where his family would have a dependable source of food. There were now four mouths to feed; a second child, daughter Fran, was one at the time of the move. While the details of what happened to the dry goods store are not fully known, Dallas speculated that because of the depression Albert and Maymie had allowed so many people to purchase items on credit that the business simply had more flowing out than in and became insolvent.⁹

While details of Maymie's readjustment to farm life are not known, a poem she wrote for the local newspaper—*The Buffalo Reflex*—may provide insight. Maymie often submitted original poems, essays, and suggestions for write-ups concerning the accomplishments of her children, particularly those of her oldest son, J. I.

'Tis sad to be bit by the writing bug.
No work, no rest, no sleep.
No time to visit one's neighbors;
There's barely time to eat.
The work piles up around me so,
My furniture and floors are a sight!
I get my mop and dusting cloth
—Sit down and start to write.
The hubby comes in requiring lunch
To my shocking, remorseful surprise.
I honestly had no idea 'twas noon.
When I write—my, how time flies!
He calmly but firmly suggests
I allow him to start a fire with my trash
That he might prepare for himself and kids
A bit of toast and some hash.
Abashed and enraged, I plunged to work
And toiled till the sun had set.
The house became neat and tidy again
But hubby's words, I couldn't forget.

So, next morning ere the dew is all gone
I attack the yard so sadly in need.
I rake and hoe and gather cans,
Burn trash and cut the weeds.
Then thinking it scarcely time for lunch,
And truly in need of some rest,
I dare to sit and pen a few lines
'Bout the beauty of the scenery, west.
For as I worked in the sweet scented open
With Springtime's orchestra attune—
I found my resolve to quit writing was broken.
The bug sealed my doom.
So I sat searching for adjectives
To describe the trees, hills and sky,
And forgot my family's existence
Till husband again stood nigh.
So the bug bites me day after day,
Making me want to write
A poem about the trees I see;
A story about the folk on my right.
Tho' Spring is my favorite season
I'll be somewhat relieved when it's gone.
For when it departs it usually takes
My writing bug along.¹⁰

Albert may have anticipated the economic collapse of the country, but he had no way of foretelling the coming dust bowl and agricultural plagues. Tiring of farm life he ran for an elected county position. In 1934 he was elected county collector of revenue, and in the summer of 1935 he rented the farm and moved the family—Albert, Maymie, J. I., Fran, and the newest member, Duane—back to town.

Their rental house was small. Dallas later recalled the house to be modest—perhaps containing only two rooms. Whatever the case, it was in this tiny house that Dallas Albert Willard was born and lived the first eighteen months of his life.

After a year and a half back in Buffalo, in the spring of 1937, it was determined that the renter at the farm was not working out very well. The rent was not being paid—perhaps as a result of the unexpected cloud of

grasshoppers. The Willard family, running low on options, packed up and moved back to the farm on Greasy Creek.

For Maymie it was an unhappy return to farm living, and there was growing tension in her relationship with Albert. They had frequent spats during this time. And it continued to be tough work farming the land. Later in life, Dallas remembered how rocky the land was on the farms in southern Missouri. “My land’s so poor, so hard and ‘yeller,” Hank Williams sang in “Everything’s Okay.” Dallas recalled the next line: “You have to sit on a sack of fertilizer to raise an ‘umbreller.”¹¹

Albert had hoped to protect his family, but economic depression and natural disaster had overwhelmed them. And there was another storm coming: one that would prove far more damaging to the Willard family than any locust.

KEEP ETERNITY BEFORE THE EYES OF THE CHILDREN

In a touching photo of the Willard children taken during this time—most likely by Maymie—a sixteen-year-old J. I. wears overalls and holds his two-year-old brother, Dallas, in his lap. Nine-year-old Fran and six-year-old Duane are huddled together. They seem a happy, close family. Which makes what

happened next all the more tragic.

Not long after the photograph was taken of the children, Maymie jumped from the hay wagon. The impact of her fall caused a hernia. She needed surgery, and that meant a trip to a larger town across the state line, into Kansas. There was a good hospital in Springfield, Missouri, about thirty miles away, but Albert had bought an insurance policy through the Susan B. Allen Hospital in Topeka, Kansas, 218 miles from their home. So that’s where he drove Maymie. Myrtle Pease Lindesmith, Maymie’s widowed mother, came to



Dallas at age two

stay with the children while Albert took his wife on the grueling trip to Topeka, over dirt roads and two-lane blacktop.

It is no small wonder that Maymie arrived at the hospital with a developing fever. The surgery had to be put off for two weeks. While she was recovering from her fever, Albert made a brief trip back home to Greasy Creek to be with the children.

From her hospital bed, Maymie wrote poems to her children as a substitute for her loving presence. On February 2, 1938, J. I.'s seventeenth birthday, she wrote him "A Mother's Wish for Her Son."

Another milestone on life's way
Is passing dear lad of mine
Another year with all its joys
and sorrows lie behind.
It seems but yesterday to me
since your sweet chubby hand
Was clasped in mine so strong and brown
That you might firmly stand.
May this new year that lies ahead
Be just the very year you need
With friends and joys and work to do
But always time for a golden deed.
And may the Father's loving hand
Hold yours now brown and strong
And lead you in His infinite way
As thru this mile you tread along.

Maymie continued to get worse. Sensing what would be her fate, she penned a poem, "Somehow It's Best," on February 5, 1938. The words reveal a heavy heart searching for answers for what she sensed was about to happen.

I cannot see, why it must be
my health should fail me so
That at this time in my very prime
all toil I must forego.
But surely there's a reason
why that I must lie and wait
And suffer pain and dire distress
and humbly pray for a kinder fate.

Perhaps I failed to appreciate good health
when it was mine,
And closed my eyes to others' needs
when on beds of suffering they reclined.
How little did I appreciate
what home and loved ones meant
Until my Lord saw my great need
and to this hospital I was sent.
Maybe He saw my crying need
was patience for each day
To quietly wait His counsel wise
to lead me on the way.
Perchance He saw my need of love
implanted in my soul
To help poor fallen fellow-men
to grasp the Heavenly goal.
I may have on my strength relied
which caused my Lord to see
That through pain and helplessness
I might obtain humility.
Perhaps my faith in God and man
was faltering and weak
I know not why—but know
'tis best, to beg for mercy at His feet.

One day later, February 6, Maymie found the strength to write a poem for Fran, titled "Little Pal O' Mine," on her tenth birthday.

Maymie's fever finally went down and Albert returned to Topeka for the surgery. On February 11, Albert was told that his wife was doing well and he should go get some sleep at a nearby motel. He had been there for only a short while when he was called at 11 p.m. and told to come back. He drove through a dense fog. It was about 1 a.m., two days before Valentine's Day, when Maymie turned her head on the pillow and whispered, "Albert, keep eternity before the eyes of the children." Those were her last words. She died on February 12, 1938.

Albert called Maymie's mother. She gathered together J. I., Fran, Duane, and Dallas, and told them that their mother had died. J. I. jumped up and exclaimed, "Oh, no! I've not been living the way she thought I was." He had

written his mother a Valentine's Day card and mailed it the day before she died. The hospital returned it to him, unopened.

The funeral director confirmed what the family had begun to fear. The surgeon had done a bad job. A different hospital, a different doctor, and most likely Maymie would still be alive.

Albert had lost his older sister and felt the pains of grief and confusion when he had been the same age as Dallas; so he must have had particular empathy for his youngest child. Certainly two-year-old Dallas didn't understand what was happening. During the wake, while his mother's body lay lifeless, he tried to climb into the casket to be with her.¹²

BECOMING DALLAS WILLARD

Dallas lost his mother before any permanent images of her could be painted across his young mind. He had only ephemeral impressions of a few places where she had been with him.

Very late in his life he still fondly remembered the curved benches in the church where she held him as a child. "The old curved seats of the First Baptist Church in Buffalo often reminded me of her," he recalls. "I know she was there with me. And I can see a place called Bennett Springs, near the house where we lived when she went away. There is a pond nearby. I know she was there, gathering watercress. She had an angelic presence."

Bennett Springs is a beautiful act of nature. Crystal clear spring water comes up from deep underground and fills a large basin the size of a small pond. The banks are lined with vegetation. A wide creek exits the spring-fed pond and travels south. Dallas's precious memories of his mother drew his mind to this Eden-like location. During an interview, seventy-five years later, as he recounted these cherished images, a smile seemed to kiss his face.

Because Dallas could not recall the face of the love of his early life, it is moving that the greatest theme of his writing would become the reality of experiential friendship with an always-present and loving God. As we shall see, people Dallas loved as a child kept exiting his life. He became drawn to a good and loving God who lived in the heavens—the enveloping atmosphere of the here and now—who is always with his children and embraces them in love and never lets go.

Eternal living, he would later discover in the words of Jesus, means entering into a transforming friendship with the Trinity, a community of love that will never go away.