

THE LAST TIMES OF THAT OCTOBER

I saw her for the last time on such a rare and wonderful autumn day as this. With fall crispness charging the air, our long, lingering stroll around the campus let her enjoy the unique texture of October breeze and sun upon her cheeks.

Our visit completed, I offered my goodbyes--without realizing she was hearing them for the last time. But it's not ordained for us to know the times or epochs of our lives, to read with full comprehension the great plans indelibly etched upon the scroll of eternity.

I returned home that bright October afternoon to mundane duties far less significant than the one just completed. We retired as usual that evening, around 10:00, only to be jolted awake at 3:00 by the telephone call many parents silently fear deep within their souls.

"Jenny is in cardiac arrest," the voice dutifully reported. "You can meet the ambulance at the emergency room." We numbly scrambled to pull ourselves together.

We were there when the ambulance arrived, and a group of medical personnel hovered over Jenny, frantic in their attempts to revive her.

"How long has she been this way?" I asked, dreading the answer. The terse reply came: "Twenty-five minutes."

"There's no use continuing," I acknowledged. "Let her go." They questioned my decision. "Are you sure?" I was.

Then came a few moments alone with her, the formal documents to sign, the sober trip home, the decisions about what to do first, the long wait until daylight before making the requisite calls, the cleaning and the tentative plans.

Mary shopped for a suitable outfit, one of soft, respectful pink for the daughter who would, after all, need to look lovely for friends coming to see her for one last time. And she did. Mary called me from the funeral home. "I've just seen the most beautiful girl in the world." And she had.

Along with Mary and me, her brother spoke at the funeral. Then we three offered our goodbyes--knowing they were for the last time.

On rare and wonderful autumn days such as this, I sometimes wonder: Is there really a heaven? What will it be like? Will we remember our times together? Will we know each other? Will we be able to take long, lingering strolls and feel the October breeze and sun upon our cheeks?

But in those moments of evaluation, Jesus' assurances from the Bible spring up within me. "Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also."

Thus I seldom recall that particular rare and wonderful autumn day--October 2, 1995--with any residual sadness. For it was, and still remains, one of the few great watersheds of our lives, defining the terrain and landscape in which we will live out our remaining years. And the last times of that unique October confirm the beliefs we truly call our own.