

Sister Jane McDonnell, BVM (Bonaventure)
Wake Stories/Reflections
Marian Hall Chapel, Sept. 6, 2016

Agnes Marie (Dee Dee) Keena, BVM (Read by LaDonna Manternach, BVM)

“From a Sister Bonaventure to a Jane Story”

I first met Jane McDonnell, Sister Bonaventure, as a scholastic. The scholastics spent a summer at Clarke University in Dubuque, Iowa. Sr. Bonaventure was teaching a literature class. Now it was rumored that Sister demanded a lot from her students. She didn't spend time chit-chatting with the scholastics. It was all business.

Well, I wasn't the best student, but I did enjoy learning. However, I was apprehensive when I found out that I had Sister Bonaventure for a literature class. I told Nancy McCarville, then Jane Mary, BVM, that we best sit in the front of the class. It wasn't hard to find a place in front. It appeared the other 28 were hugging the back seats.

After the first class I told Nancy that we should talk with Sister Bonaventure after the next class. She looked at me and said, "What do we say?" Nancy always knew what to say and my response was, "I don't know, but let's try." So we did stop to talk with her the following class day. Nancy found out that she and Jane had connections from Fort Dodge. I don't even remember what I added to the conversation. I do know that we kept having these short meetings with her. I do know that the strategies she used in teaching addressed my learning style. I looked forward to the class and to my surprise did quite well; but more importantly I met another BVM who had a deep reverence for life and for the BVM congregation.

My story isn't over. In 2000 I was on a sabbatical and spent time at Mount Carmel. I began to reconnect with Jane. I did tell her how frightened I was of her as a scholastic. She just smiled. During the following years Jane would send me some of her poetry, always with a personal note. One poem I wanted to put into our parish bulletin. I asked her if I could and she said, "Oh no, it hasn't been published."

Well, there were times when I thought about Jane and decided perhaps she didn't have enough to do at Mount Carmel. I decided to send her a few poems I had written. I asked her to critique them. Well, I should not have been surprised when she returned them to me with red markings and comments over the paper. I smiled when I saw them. I thought my poems were good until I saw the corrections. I still have the originals with Jane's markings and comments. Jane not only left her red markings on my papers, but she left her love of God, love of community, love of family and love of all creation in my heart. I am most grateful that Nancy McCarville and I did not hesitate to step out of the group and begin small talk with a person whom I later recognized as a very holy woman.

In her poem, "Are You Joining the Dance?" Jane ends by saying:

I clean my glasses, cock my ear

and prepare my heart, the better
to search reality and to join the joyful
dance that changes the face of the earth.

Well Jane, I know you cleaned your glasses and cocked your ear and prepared your heart to join the joyful dance that will truly be eternal. One day, I too, along with your other family members and BVM sisters and associates will join you in the dance. Like the disciples on the road to Emmaus we will journey with the Lord, listening to Him, visiting with Him and learning how to live. Like the disciples we will catch our breath and hang in there as we pray: "Stay with me, it is almost evening, the day—my life—is about over, don't leave me now, I need You" (Excerpt from "Seven Endless Miles" by Jane McDonnell.)

Irene Lukefahr, BVM

Dee Dee's letter reminds me that I too was one of the scholastics rather intimidated by Jane although I never had her in class. I have two stories about Jane that for me are very tender. Usually Jane was in the Marian Hall dining room for breakfast. I would often go around the tables to visit with each of the sisters. One morning I was at a table and I don't remember if I missed Jane or what, but her hands were waving at me. So I went over and said, "Jane, how can I help you?" She said, "I just wanted to say hello." I just kissed her on the forehead; I thought that was so sweet.

The second time was when she was up on third floor of Marian Hall South. I passed her room and saw that she was sitting in her chair awake, so I stopped to visit. She said, "I have something for you." Very slowly, she took her hands out from under the afghan. She had a little Snickers bar. She unwrapped it and shared it with me. I just felt like that was Eucharist for the day.

Kathryn Lawlor, BVM

I knew Jane when she worked in the archives. When Jane went to work in the archives, we had decided that we needed a profile on each sister who had died. At that time, 2,500 sisters had died. When I suggested to Jane that she do the profiles, she eagerly went at it. It was wonderful! Now we have over 3,000 deceased sisters' profiles. When anyone wants to know about a sister in our community who has died, we just pull out one of those profiles and send it to them. She gave us a wonderful gift in the archives.

However, as you know, Jane had a very creative imagination and sometimes she would want to improve the life of the sister that she was writing about. Fortunately, she was working with Maureen Whalen, BVM. When Jane would get carried away with some sister's life, Maureen would say, "Just the facts, Jane. Just the facts." We are very grateful to Jane for the great contribution she made to our archives.

Martha Ryder, BVM (Briant)

When I was first professed, I was sent to the Immaculata. I had never been to a Catholic school so I didn't know much about what was going on. Jane was my first roommate and she was very

helpful to me. Thank you very much, Jane. I remember especially that the sisters always seemed to be selling things. She assured me that I didn't have to try to come in first, but just make a real effort.

Catherine Dunn, BVM

In addition to the beautiful poetry that Jane wrote, she also did a book that we asked her to do called *Clarke Lives!* It was after the fire, but it wasn't just about the fire. We asked her to take the history from where it was in print and bring it up to date, which at that point was about 1990. That book has been in the hands of just about every one of our alums and they love it. It's beautifully done and a testimony to a very, very, very gifted woman. Just a little aside, she was our pray-er at our house for several years until she died.

Bertha Fox, BVM

Jane did poetry, but probably very few people know that Jane helped change the language of hymns so that it was more inclusive. I was working with the International Commission on English in the Liturgy (ICEL) in the late 1970s. We needed somebody to change the hymn text that would be included in a book to be published. I volunteered Jane without ever asking her.

She was pleased to do it and she did dozens of hymns, changing the poetry so that it could be an exhibition of inclusive language. She didn't have a copy of the book, but I did. A few years ago, after she had retired, I copied the book and gave it to her because she is remembered in the introduction to that book of hymns. She was so grateful that it makes me feel very, very humble. She was pleased to do it and she was recognized.

Carolyn Farrell, BVM

I knew Jane in yet another way. This goes back to the 1970s when I was living on Alta Vista in Dubuque, Iowa, with Barbara Kutchera. This is the social Jane, the Jane that loved to party. Well, so did Alta Vista. We had parties with the Clarke BVMs and other people and often gathered for a happy hour between 5 and 7 p.m. to call it a day. We were both working—Barbara at Clarke in the English department and I at St. Patrick—and would come tearing home to set up the party, to get ready for all the people who were coming. Jane would come 20 minutes early; it was a given. That didn't happen just once, or twice or three times. So whenever we had a gathering, we always knew that Jane would be one of our first customers and we planned accordingly. We were grateful for Jane because she added a lot to the party in her own way. I always remembered that part of Jane.

The other part I remember was later on in the 1980s when I was a regional representative. I went up to Minot, N.D., which was awfully cold, and visited her while she was working in the parish. That was a later ministry that she had and she loved it. The part that was special was seeing the Peace Garden that was in North Dakota. Jane was very much into peace and justice; that was another forte of hers. Going to the Peace Garden with Jane was an experience I'll remember. I would have never gotten there if it was not for her. We also saw the missile sites that are now non-functioning, but were scary at the time. Those two things also added to Jane full, rich life. I'm glad I knew her.

Jim Rodenborn, Nephew, Fort Dodge, Iowa

As Jane would say, "Why not Minot?" This is not so much a story as a memory. For years Jane would come and visit our family at holidays, particularly at Christmas. She was a fabulous house guest. As you know, she was Irish, opinionated, enjoyed her Scotch and we had fun. When the extended family and other guests came to the house, conversation would evolve into politics and world events. You would expect Jane to be opinionated, but she was not. She always kept her tongue to herself.

She was a fabulous house guest. We would usually go to Mass on Christmas Eve, but one time we went to midnight Mass which was at 10 p.m. When my youngest child was about five, he was our wild child and had a temper and was physical. By the time we got to Mass, of course, we couldn't sit together. We broke ranks. Who had to take the wild child? Jane grabbed him and took him with her and sat with him in a pew. We were delegated to the balcony where we could keep an eye on him and her. It was probably four or five minutes into the Mass when he fell asleep in her arms. That's a memory amongst many that I have of Jane. May she rest in peace.

Mary Jo Vsotros, Niece

Aunt Janie cooked for us once when my mom was in the hospital with my sister Lisa and she came out to the house to help out. Aunt Janie had many talents, but cooking was not one of them. She made us a meatloaf and found some peas and carrots and threw them into the meatloaf. When it was half baked, she went to drain it in the sink. You know where the meatloaf ended up. She didn't miss a beat. She picked it all up and put it on the table and that's what we had for dinner that night. I'm a Clarke University alum; I graduated in 1972 and 1988. In 1970, I went to school in Seoul, Korea, at a university. She would write to me that she sent me some books. She must have talked with Sister Ramona Barwick, BVM, who was in charge of the Clarke bookstore, because one of the books was a trashy romance novel called *Love Story*. We all have our own memories and they are all good.

Therese Fox, BVM

Every once in a while, Jane would be brought to our Sit and Stretch class. She would sit there. The director would ask her if she wanted to join the exercise. She would let us know immediately if she wanted to join in. There was no doubt about her joining one of the activities. We each had a noodle, like what kids use in a pool, and then they brought out an inflated beach ball and we would bat that around. Jane was in her glory trying to hit it and getting it back into the center, as was Vinnie (Sister Vincentia Kaefenstein, BVM). Vinnie also just delighted in that. I delighted in watching them.

Sister Anne Maria McKenna, BVM

Thank you for sharing your memories, your stories of Jane: aunt, sister and friend. Perhaps all is well summed up by Amy Dunker, professor of music at Clarke University in Dubuque, Iowa, who set Jane's poems to music. Amy sent me a very brief email saying, "Sister Jane was a great poet and a really cool person." I think we have heard that this morning.