

Sister Mary Elizabeth Eaton, BVM
Wake Stories/Reflections
Marian Hall Chapel, Nov. 12, 2013

Toni Walling, Friend & Former Student (Read by Sister Virginia Crilly, BVM)

Of course my heart is a little bit broken, but Mary was so pleased to have lived to her 100th birthday, let alone beyond it. She is, now, in a far better place and we all know that. Her health was such an issue and now she is free of all that. It is difficult to describe how Mary's death affects me. It is, a bit, as if I have lost a parent. I truly loved her and was so sorry to have her so far away. When she was living in Des Moines, Iowa, I would go visit her and her parents. I never lost track of her. When her last parent died, I went to her house over the noon hour and she told me she would be going back to the sisterhood. Talk about broken hearts; I was so sad. I thought I would never see her again. Then years later a friend told me where she was and we were able to resume visits. She holds a magical place in my heart, a place in that portion that holds all the magic of childhood Christmases. She helped create them. They put a piano in the school hallway and we students were allowed to come a half hour early, sit on the wooden floor with wet mittens and the smell of wool, and sing Christmas carol after Christmas carol. It was simply wonderful.

Sister Stella Marie Swakoski, BVM

Mary Eaton entered with our set in September 1938 so I have known her all these years. Before she passed away, when I was visiting with her, she said to me, "Stella, I would like for you to tell this segment of my life at my wake." I am going to share with you what Mary told me. Mary, as you know, was from Des Moines and went to St. Joseph Academy for four years. Her parents sent her to Grinnell College in Grinnell, Iowa, for her higher education. Meanwhile in Malaysia, two brothers decided to join the American forces and fight for America in World War II. When those two brothers returned to Malaysia, they had the GI Bill of Rights and so they said to their parents and their younger sister, "We are going to send you, Sybil, to the United States for higher education." So they sat down and they wrote to 12 different universities and colleges in America. Eleven of those colleges and universities asked, "How much money do you have? How do you intend to pay for her education?" Money was a big issue with 11 of them, but one college, Grinnell, wrote back and said, "Send Sybil to us and we will educate her." They made no mention of money.

When Mary came to Grinnell as a freshman, Sybil also came as a freshman. They both liked music and took classes together. When it came time for the first vacation, Mary was going home to Des Moines to be with her parents. While she was getting ready, she said, "Sybil, what are you going to do while I'm gone?" Sybil said, "I'm just going to stay here. I have no place to go." So Mary contacted her parents and asked, "May I bring a Malaysian girl, Sybil, home with me?" They readily agreed. When Sybil got to Mary's home in Des Moines, she became fast friends with Mary's parents. For all the remaining years of their lives, they were very close and very loving; they had a strong bond.

Meanwhile, Mary left Grinnell and found a position as a nanny in England and was there for some time. When she came back to the United States, she visited the Academy and decided to become a Catholic. Later on she decided to join the BVMs. Meanwhile, Sybil stayed in the

United States and continued her education. Eventually she got her master's degree and married her teacher, John, who became a superintendent. Mary remained with the BVMs until just before final vows, when her parents became very visually impaired. Mary found it necessary to leave to take care of them.

Now fast forward to October 2005 when I came back to Mount Carmel for retirement and I went to see Mary. Mary said, "Oh, Stella, you told me that your nephew lives in Montrose, Colo. That's only 50 miles from Grand Junction. My very dearest friend lives in Grand Junction. I wish you could go see her." So we talked about it and I talked to my nephew who had been an officer in the Air Force and to his dad who had been an officer in the Navy. They decided they would drive me to Grand Junction. We had to go through a beautiful landscaped area to get there. Beautiful flowers, the most gorgeous trees—everything was perfect.

The home was the most perfect home you would ever want to see. The greatest delight that Sybil took in her home was that she had a room named "Mary Eaton's Room." Mary Eaton's Room was decorated to perfection. She even had Mary's initial embroidered on the towels. I visited with Sybil and we had a great time. Genevieve Kordick was with me. We came back to Mount Carmel and told Mary about the wonderful visit we had. Mary was so very pleased. She continued corresponding with Sybil. Sybil's husband passed away, and at the present time, Sybil lives alone in a beautiful retirement home in Grand Junction. Mary always said that her greatest joy in life, along with being a BVM, was knowing Sybil. Mary, I'm going to call Sybil and tell her about the beautiful ceremony we had in your honor.

Brenda Mearns, Cousin, Great Britain (Read by Kathleen Danz)

Although I am unable to be present at my Cousin Mary's funeral, I should like to contribute a few words to celebrate the passing of a remarkable lady to the place our Lord has prepared for her. For most of our lives, Mary and I have been divided by an ocean, although our parents always exchanged letters with one another. During the war, Auntie Edie also sent us delicious food parcels for Christmas and birthdays, so that we could revel in delights such as Jell-O and dried fruit! It was not until 1960, when my husband and I spent two years in Ottawa, that we were able to meet on a very special visit to the family in Des Moines. Since then Mary and I have corresponded regularly. Our family was delighted to welcome Mary to our home, too, on her one visit to the United Kingdom after her parents had died. I think Mary had inherited her mother's Yorkshire forthright ways and sense of duty, which led to her practical acceptance of whatever situation she found herself in—whether this was leaving her chosen vocation for years in order to support her aging parents (long-lived like herself!) or coping with life in a wheelchair. Right to the end of her 100 years, she lived life wholeheartedly and without complaint.

Mary loved her teaching and musical activities, being both a learner and a teacher by nature, and was blessed with an amazing memory; she was always interested to discover something new or to delve into another book, and then to share her delight with others (as well as keeping us all in order). At one time Mary's class and mine exchanged reel-to-reel tapes about their homes and activities—an eye-opener for both groups! Mary's quick mind and depth of perception and concern have continued undiminished by age. World events, family doings, discoveries about other countries, flowers in the garden or politics were among the many things she took an

interest in. It was perhaps most of all, people, who interested and were closest to Mary's heart; because of her caring, kindly ways she has had many contacts with old friends and former pupils.

How thankful I am that members of Mary's family from both Britain, America and Africa were able to meet and celebrate her 100 years in the spring! Not only did we all enjoy the occasion and the visit, but more importantly, so did Mary herself. In her usual well-organized way, she had everything carefully planned months before, even to rearranging dining room seating to please her. Now I shall very much miss those regular letters with the familiar handwriting, containing news, thoughtful comments, suggested books to read, newspaper cuttings, etc. And I shall miss my occasional visits to Mount Carmel and those long talks about anything and everything, as well as the wonderful hospitality and welcome from all the very special sisters. The world seems a poorer place without my cousin, her vibrant faith and lovely smile. But I thank God that I have been privileged to know her.

Dr. Peter Hurst, Cousin

Brenda has clearly given a very good account of Mary's life and the way she has enjoyed being in this community. I live in Chicago and am a professor at the Northwestern University Medical School. My wife, who is here with me today, is a physician who trained at the University of Chicago. Thank you to all of you here who have made her life so special. Mary certainly wasn't one to roll over and play dead for anyone. She would call people on what she saw was not right. I'm sure many of you have witnessed that for yourselves. It was always with good intentions, I would say, but perhaps at first it didn't appear that way.

There's a story I shared with Mary some time ago that she enjoyed and I would like to share it with you today. In many ways it sums up Mary in a way that few other things can do. It relates to a friend of mine. I was at a boarding school in Scotland. My friend was the son of a dentist and his father had a very thriving practice. When he finished school, his father said, "I'm going to retire soon. Why don't you go to dental school, qualify as a dentist, and take over my practice? It's been highly successful and you would do very well." The boy said, "No, no, father, I want to become an actor. The dentistry business does not interest me in the slightest. I want to go on the stage and act." Well, the father said, "My dear fellow, the jobs are very few and far between. You'll have periods of doing nothing. You will not make a success of it; I'm sure you will not." But the boy persisted; he would have none of the dentistry and wanted to go on to the stage.

He found himself an agent, went to drama school, and learned some lines and the agent kept trying to find him positions as a young actor. Nothing much was happening; it went for weeks and months on end and there were no jobs. Lo and behold, one afternoon the agent called this young man and said, "We have a part for you up in Aberdeen." They were in London, a distance of some 400 miles. "You must get on the train up to Aberdeen. It's a simple part you have, a very simple part, but it may be the start of a marvelous career for you. Come and meet me in my office and I will tell you what you have to say." The young man rushed off down to the agent's office. The agent said, "Now here you are. This is your part, 'Hark! I hear a cannon roar!' Now that's all you have to say, 'Hark! I hear a cannon roar!'" The young man jumped on a train at King's Cross and the train headed up to Scotland, flying up the coastline all the way to Aberdeen. All the way up the boy is thinking, "Hark! I hear a cannon roar! Hark! I hear a cannon roar!" He's getting quite good at this on the way up. He practices intently. The train gets to the

border and now he has the motions. “Hark! I hear a cannon roar!” He gets to Aberdeen and the train pulls in. The man from the theatre is waiting there and says, “Hurry up, my young man; you are going to be on the stage in just a moment or two.” The boy is thinking, “Hark! I hear a cannon roar!” He has his line to perfection. They get to the theatre and they get him into his costume and he is standing there very confidently in the wings of the theatre with a full house in front of him. The manager says, “Now you’re on.” Very nonchalantly, he wanders into the middle of the stage full of confidence. There is a very enormous bang behind him and he says, “What the devil was that?”

It reminded me of Mary—keep your eye on the goal. She was never deflected by minor things. She saw her life and she lived it as she thought fit. She was not put aside by minor things. Mary had a lesson for our family; we have four children with two girls in medical school and two boys in other subjects. They learned that Mary was direct and she knew what she wanted and she set out to get it. But in doing that, she made a lot of friends. The community here today deserves thanks from our family, both in this country and abroad, for all you did to make her life so successful. We thank you immensely from the bottom of our hearts.

Ruth Lillie, Godchild

I was born and raised in Des Moines. I lived at 23rd and High St. Just up the hill on 23rd St., Mary lived with her parents. I only knew her as Mary Eaton. Our friendship grew over the years. My earliest childhood memory is of going with my parents to visit Mary and her parents.

I was not raised a Catholic, but converted when I was in high school. I asked Mary to be my godmother and she happily agreed. On Sunday morning she would pick me up at the bottom of the hill and we would go to Mass at the Cathedral. When I was making plans for my wedding, she helped me with many of the musical selections. After I was married, when I would go home to visit my mom, my family and I would always make time to go and visit Mary. It wasn’t until she re-entered this community that I learned her story of leaving here and going home to care for her parents. We would then make the trip to Dubuque once or twice a year to visit.

This year we had planned to leave our winter place in Texas a little later in the spring to attend her belated 100th birthday celebration. But my husband passed away on March 21, so we had to hurry home to make funeral arrangements. Other interruptions happened this summer and fall that prevented me from getting here to visit with her this year. I feel badly, but I spoke with Mary on the phone numerous times and wrote letters. Of course, she understood. I last talked to her in September. We had a great visit and she was as sharp as always. I have so many memories to hold on to. I am privileged to have had her in my life. She will always be missed and always will I love her. Mary, I would like to extend to you a verse from a song. “May the choirs of angels come to greet you. May they speed you to paradise. May the Lord enfold you in his mercy. May you have eternal life.”

Sister Donard Collins, BVM

If there is one word to sum up Mary, it would be generosity. She was certainly Miss Generosity. Mary did so much at the Motherhouse for the sisters, so much behind the scenes. She was our night emergency person. She always made extra little things for St. Nick’s Day, all behind the scenes. The thing that impressed me most about Mary was the fact that she could zoom around

the area in the car. We always had to remind her that there *is* a speed limit. She did drive a little fast, but she orientated many of our drivers. Mary had a Christmas cactus. When she was moving out of the Letter Wing in the Motherhouse, she said to me, "Would you take this plant? It has never bloomed, but it is very special." I took the plant and the very first year it bloomed; it blooms two or three times a year. When I heard that Mary died last week, I went to check the plant and sure enough, the buds were just beginning.

Sister Eileen Healy, BVM

This follows up on Mary being the emergency person. I was living on Rush Street and I was the person on call. To me it was the middle of the night when she called. I said, "What time is it?" after the sisters I lived with woke me up because I didn't hear the phone. She said, "Well, it's 11:30. Were you asleep?"

Another thing about Mary is that she played the organ at all the wakes in this chapel. It wasn't as easy as it is now because the two houses were not connected at that time. It was up the stairs behind the Center and into Marian Hall or drive with a car around the buildings. I'm not sure which Mary did. The wakes were at night so she was here from 7 p.m. until 9 p.m. and took care of all that. There were many little things that Mary did for all those years that kept the house running very, very well. And she was the only sister with a phone in her room, so if sisters received calls from family out of time and place, she would go and get them. She did a great service for us.

Sister Diane Forster, BVM

Those of us who have dealt with Mary musically know her love for the organ above all other instruments and her love for the traditional music which is J. S. Bach and his friends. She, by way of contrast, introduced me to some relatives one day as, "This is Diane. She likes everything modern." Beyond that, Mary and I enjoyed a lot of time sharing what would be tales from the music room. I discovered that we shared the philosophy at great depth of what children needed to learn, what they would enjoy and how they should be learning it. That was very encouraging. She always wanted to hear how things were in my classroom. She had tales to tell as well. She enjoyed and even laughed at things that my kids were doing. I loved Mary for many things and that is one of them.

BVM Sisters Jeanne Granville, Karen Pollard, and Margaret McCulloch, St. Louis

(Read by Sister Mary Crimmin, BVM)

We never lived with Mary but as our prayer partner, she was a real and vital part of our community for the past six years. We counted on her prayers and enjoyed her letters so full of news. Mary kept us aware of everything happening at Mount Carmel: special events, building renovations, people arriving, changes in routines. Her descriptions were vivid, her opinions on events succinct *and definite*. When we did get to Dubuque, a visit to Mary was our first stop. Even when she had suffered a setback in her health, when her arthritis was very painful, when her leg was amputated, she was full of life. She wanted to know every detail of our lives. Our family concerns were hers and she shared her family with us. We exchanged greetings on birthday, feast days, Easter and Christmas, but we never sent our English friend a St. Patrick's Day greeting.