

Sister Mary Clare Sweeney, BVM (Clarita)
Wake Stories/Reflections
Marian Hall Chapel, July 11, 2014

Renie Reilly, friend, Tempe, Ariz. (Read by Sister Virginia Crilly, BVM)

I was just making a pot of blueberry tea, and in a moment all went blue. A call came in from the list . . . You taught us about lists—those brainstorming of feelings and things that clear the thicket of thought for our creative endeavors. You challenged and cheered us with your voice; that voice we became accustomed to; the voice we wanted and needed to hear like a soft melody of accompaniment to the hard work of our hands—writing the stories of our lives that would make way for the art of our living. You opened a path for possibilities and dreams to emerge, set before our own eyes from the blank page.

We gathered in a kindred circle to sit at your feet, entrusted with our whims and wishes, fears and doubts to push, and push a little more, a bit deeper now, with our hand stretched from the heart to the page, the ache, the fingers stiff, the wariness, the exhilaration, and in the end, the accomplished. You graciously acknowledged an importance to our work that we may have dismissed otherwise. And through it all, the tenderness and delight of your friendship grew like the web of farm roots under our feet, connecting our presence with one another, and the presence of ancestors you prompted us in a longing to remember. You made us a tribe, a part of your legacy.

May our mighty and holy pens continue to move across the pages of our lives, with a pause from time to time, with a smile for the one who smiles back at us between the ink and the paper, and the spaces between the words. Sr. Clare, your name is forever written in indelible ink in on our hearts—dipped green from the wells of Eire.

Sister Mary McCauley, BVM

I have a few notes sent from people in the Tempe, Ariz., area that I had the privilege of speaking with following Mary Clare's death. I don't know them, but I do know they loved Mary Clare. This first note comes from Sister Jean Steffens. Sister Jean is now the current leader of the congregation of the Sisters of St. Agnes in Fond du Lac, Wis. But Mary Clare knew her when she was the Vicar of Religious in the Phoenix diocese.

Sister Jean Steffens, CSA (Read by Sister Mary McCauley, BVM)

Mary Clare Sweeney had an artistic sense "extraordinaire." Her work at the writing lab at ASU was a ministry she treasured. Her skills were obvious and abundant. Mary Clare had a love for nature and had a deep sense of care for the earth. Her photography was another medium by which she communicated the beauty she saw all around her. She loved to connect with others regarding ideas and spirituality. The twinkle in her eye always let you know that she was thinking and responding. Her presence in a group was something to be treasured. Mary Clare will be missed by her friends and colleagues. She was both for me the 20 years I had the privilege to serve the sisters and brothers of the diocese of Phoenix. Go in peace, Mary Clare.

Marie Stewart, friend (Read by Sister Mary McCauley, BVM)

Sister Clare came into my life onboard a flight to Israel. We shared the same seat row and talked through the night on that long flight and saw dawn rise over the Holy Land. She was delightful

and enthusiastic. During our Holy Land Pilgrimage with Kevin Saunders's Bible class, we bonded. She is in many of my photos. Afterwards we met at Bible class, at lectures, for lunch and suppers and at photography club meetings. She taught me so much about life, spirituality, and travel and became a role model. She returned to the Midwest to see and help ailing members of her family. Never did I expect that she would succumb to illness. Oh, dear Sister Clare, I miss you so, never to see your twinkling blue eyes, your delightful warm smile, to hear your words of wisdom. I have offered my daily Masses and prayers this week for you. When the church bells tolled, it was for you. "The Old Irish Blessing" song words and melody keeps running in my mind and heart: "May the road rise to greet you . . . and until we meet again, may God hold you in the palm of God's hand."

Diane Saunders, wife of Kevin Saunders (Read by Sister Mary McCauley, BVM)

Sr. Clare, you mean so much to me, to our family, and to the community of women that God gathered together over these past 10 years. You also took becoming a doctor of English literature very seriously as well. Kevin and I met you when we were students at Arizona State University. You were working on your Ph.D. I remember helping you move once and attending a house-blessing Mass at your new apartment. A very special connection grew for us all long ago in a very dynamic faith community that became the driving force in all of our lives. Kevin's work in biblical studies took us to live in many various communities across the country and in the year 2000, we moved back to Arizona. I remember so well my first reunion with you in a hotel lobby in Athens. Your sparkling eyes caught my attention and I immediately recognized you. Your classes, as with the way you approached everything, with exemplary quality, brought joy to all. You would have us hold empty journals and pens, which under your direction and following your well-crafted and skillful lessons, each person would fill their journal with the treasures and wisdom of one's heart.

In class today we were studying the Magnificat and I reflected how fully you lived this song of Mary's, Sr. Clare. "My soul glorifies the Lord." We learned from your classes how this means to grow more and more into the person God has called us to be. "My Spirit rejoices in God my savior." You always greeted each person you met with your whole self, a big hug, your smiling eyes, seeing truly the gifts of God in each person. "Sr. Clare's back." Like Elizabeth, something would leap within us at your returns to the valley throughout the year. "From now on all generations will call me blessed." I so believe this. Fr. Neal baptizing you by name, "The wee bishop, our Sr. Clare." How truly you walked as a bishop amongst us in these years, pastoring, nurturing us, bringing us workers in the field, words and smiles to strengthen and bolster us up. You supported us, you supported me. You led the people of God with your bright mind, caring heart.

Sister Mary McCauley, BVM

Now just a very brief comment of my own. Ronald Rolheiser has said that the providence of God can really be described as the conspiracy of accidents. I think I became involved in Mary Clare's life because of the providence of God, but it was a conspiracy of accidents. Of course I knew Mary Clare as a BVM, but I didn't know her well. I just knew she was in Arizona. I was either in New York or here in Iowa.

But one year, Anne Kendall and I decided we would make a retreat with Jean Vanier at Mundelein, Ill. And guess who we met at supper that evening —Mary Clare, her brother Jim and Kathleen. These are the people I can remember from that retreat. Ever since then, when Mary

Clare came back it was, “Ah, we make that common retreat.” That was the conspiracy of accidents.

Then when Mary Clare became ill this past winter and Anne Kendall contacted Mary Agnes O’Connor and myself and just said, “I think she’s in the hospital. Please go to the hospital.” We did and I said, “Anne, you are in California and I am in Dubuque. I’ll journey with Mary Clare.” And what a wonderful privileged journey that was. To watch Mary Clare, this gifted woman that I just read stories about from Arizona, become the person who was no longer able to speak or express herself. She handled her illness so beautifully. Never before have I seen the Marian Hall staff handle anybody with such sensitivity. I think we can be most grateful. In the conspiracy of accidents, I have also been able to create a bond with the family. For this I will always be grateful. So for Mary Clare and the bringing of us together in a conspiracy of accidents, I am grateful.

Sister Mary Martens, BVM

I probably knew Mary Clare best in the most recent 24 years of her life. That was because I was in the southwestern United States for a couple of years and I would get to Arizona. I remember two very hospitable lunchtimes we shared together, hospitality being hers in a local restaurant that she knew. So I really knew her first with her connection to ASU. I know she was the director of the writing lab there. I know that she worked with technology early on, much before I caught on to the wonders of technology. She worked with graduate students at ASU and tutored faculty in the College of Technology at ASU.

The most recent connection I had with Mary Clare was when she came to Manor Care here in Dubuque after her stay at the hospital. Typically, we started talking and the phone rang, a friend from Tempe inquiring how she was. They carried on a conversation and I discreetly moved out to the corridor and then came back again. At that point, I really was not aware of why she had been hospitalized. She was in rehab and she had her ticket to return to Phoenix at that point. The next time I saw her was here at Marian Hall, maybe a couple of months later.

By that time, all that was left were the sparkling eyes because she was no longer able to speak. But the eyes were all that we needed. Typically, some things Mary Clare did were within the congregation. She was a member of the Communications Advisory Committee and had a lot to do with the articles planned for our *Salt* magazine. The spring/summer issue carries her name as the author even though the completion of the article was done by someone else. The article was on technology in a digital age and its importance for education. I was touched by the comments by the writer Renie Reilly who spoke so lovingly as a former student of Mary Clare. So the memories I have are very good ones, brief though they are.

John Sweeney, brother

My feelings and comments are a little bit different than what you have heard. I knew the BVMs only briefly over the years. Mary Clare would bring someone home with her during the early years of her service. My recent experience here over the past month or two has been very enlightening, very deep. How much care and concern the sisters give to each other! I don’t think anyone could get any better care than what she received here. It was most comforting that she was going through these experiences with great help and assistance. I have strong, deep feelings for the order. I know she was doing her work, with which I wasn’t too familiar. But I know these last few days were much better for her because she was with such good friends here.

Sister Judith Callahan, BVM

I am kind of a relative of a relative of a relative. That's how it goes in my family. My sister Joyce was married to the now deceased Tom Burke who was Mary Clare's first cousin. I heard about the family from Mary Clare via e-mail through the years.

Last summer, if not the summer before, she and I were up at the Spiders. We had a wonderful time and I got to know her in a way I hadn't before. She was filled with news about her family. I think she called her sister and brothers three or four times a day. On the way up, she told me all about where they worked and about the horses. So I got to know her family vicariously. I also learned about her spirituality up there. She wanted to go to the casino, not for the reason you are thinking, but to photograph the mural of the Native Americans that is quite beautiful. Many of us are too busy cha-chinging to notice the mural, but she did take some photographs. She was very interested in posting these experiences on Facebook and other media. It reflected her great love for her family.

But she wasn't perfect, in case you didn't know. Actually, it's a public confession about something up at the Spiders. Pat Potok, you might want to plug your ears. We have an electric go-cart up there which is quite nice. We can take it out and go down to the lake or around the road up close to the building. Well, she wanted to explore all the places in the immediate area. So I charged it up according to the multiple notes posted on how to charge it fully. So we set out. We had gone quite a ways and I said, "Mary Clare, I don't know if this battery is going to last." Oh, it's fine. We're going to make it. There's no problem. I have a lot of experience with these things. Don't worry about it. It's fine." I'm still nervous because we went down to the mailbox and it's quite a hill up to the house. About halfway down I said, "No, I'm turning around." "No, we're fine." "No, Mary Clare, I'm turning back." We did turn back but got stuck on the hill.

We did not make it all the way back. She had a thousand directions on how to resolve this situation. I said, "I think I'll solve this one on my own. I've had enough of your suggestions that don't work." I took the car around and found some very nice workmen who very graciously helped us back up the hill. I haven't touched the machine since then. Mary Clare was wonderful and I had a wonderful time with her. My sister and all the Burkes would have loved to have been here, but they are dealing with health issues. They send their condolences to the family.

Sister Bertha Fox, BVM

I am forever grateful to Mary Clare for putting up on the web her story of Mary Frances Clarke in Dublin. She loved that website that she worked so hard on. It was just beautiful; it had so much information and beautiful photographs. It was an indication of some of the talent she had. We worked together on committees for many, many years. Every summer when she appeared in Dubuque, we met or at least talked on the phone. It was easy to pick her out from a crowd because of her hair.

Sister Mary Ann Bradish, BVM

I just have a wonderful memory of Mary Clare. I took my brother, who is mentally and physically challenged, to a Jean Vanier retreat with five hundred others and their caregivers. When we saw Mary Clare, we were thrilled. My brother had his work, his disjointed poems and short stories that I had put together in a three-hole binder. Mary Clare gave him dignity by taking

them, reading them, and then talking to him about them. I'll never forget her kindness to him—giving him dignity.

Sister Jane Rogers, BVM

My story goes back to the 1970s when I was studying at Aquinas Institute. I was returning to Dubuque from Cascade and the car was shivering. I wasn't going to make it so I went off at the Bernard exit. I stopped at the first farm; it happened to be the Sweeney's farm. I did not know the Sweeneys before and I didn't know Mary Clare. I will never forget the graciousness of her dad and Anne. First of all, I was so grateful and surprised that they had a BVM in the family. I did my calls and got help and I left their home after much hospitality, and Anne gave me a loaf of homemade bread. I just won't forget that; it was wonderful. And it's nice to meet her family; I've met some of them since Mary Clare has been here. The last line on the reading by Jean Vanier is that we "do ordinary things with extraordinary love." I certainly felt that; I thank the Sweeneys for taking care of me that night.

Sister Therese Jacobs, BVM

I entered with Mary Clare and we had a bond of community from that, but I spent almost 10 years in Africa. The year we celebrated 60 years as BVMs together here, I had brought pictures from Ghana. Now Mary Clare had not been in Africa and was pleased with the pictures. She asked me if she could borrow them. Her love of photography, her love and interest in all of the world was really touching. I was pleased that she liked my pictures.

Mary Callahan Eliot, sister of Lois, sister-in-law of Jim

I met Mary Clare on only a couple of occasions, sometimes in the grocery store. In the past I was introduced to this poem. It touches me and I pass it on to families with loved ones who have gone forward. I would like to share it with you in a reflection of Mary Clare.

Angels

Angels are the guardians of hope and wonder, the keepers of magic and dreams.
Angels watch over you wherever you go,
keeping each day perfect and promising a bright new tomorrow.
The motto of all angels is "it's a wonderful life."
Wherever there is love; an angel is flying by.
Angels help you carry the ball, carry a tune, carry your weight and carry on!
Your guardian angel knows you inside and out and loves you just the way you are.
Angels keep the world safe for hummingbirds and butterflies and rainbows in spring.
Angels keep it simple and always travel light.
Angels love whispering secrets and whistling in the dark.
Whenever you hear music, an angel is speaking to you.
Remember to leave space in your relationships so the angels have room to play.
Your guardian angel helps you find a place when you feel there's no place to go.
Keep a spare angel in your pocket.
Angels carry high-beam lights to help you through the darkest hours.
Whenever you feel lonely, a special angel drops in for tea.
Angels know that love is the only four letter word.
We are always "angels on call" for a friend.
Every time you hear a bell ring, another angel gets his wings.

Angels are with you every step of the way and help you soar with amazing grace.
After all, we are angels in training; all we have to do is spread our wings and fly.

I have one for each of the family members and two for the Motherhouse and more with requests.
God bless.

Jim Sweeney, Brother

I recall when Mary Clare and I were young we got in an argument. Our mother and dad said, “Well, work it out. Here’s a pair of boxing gloves.” We did, and I got a black eye.

I can also share with you that Mary Clare and Anne are excellent farm people. They managed the farm very well and profited from it. They did all the activities that a farm would require with exceptional skill. Eventually they did find a good manager to do the farm work. He’s here today and we are grateful for that. In the course of helping with the farm, I was involved in a relationship with an outside person and I was told that I didn’t handle the situation very well. So I was fired, by Mary Clare.

I remember attending the University of Iowa for a year and a half. I used to walk from my apartment near St. Patrick School where Mary Clare taught first or second grade. She would have these 60 students out on the playground. I don’t remember all the commands that she gave, but when they were going into the school she clapped her hands and they gathered into two lines. Then she clapped twice and they moved into the school. When she clapped three times, they got in their seats. Now that’s pretty good management. The thing that stuck came from a comment that Sister Mary McCauley made. To me, it really sums up Mary Clare’s life—companionship of empowerment.

Sister Mary Janine Wolff, BVM

My very first mission was Iowa City; I was right across from Mary Clare. She taught me so much by the claps of the hands. My first year I had 67 in a double-grade classroom; she had 50 first graders all day and 35 kindergarten children in the afternoon. She knew how to handle them beautifully and she sure helped me. And we had a deep friendship since then. Thank you, Mary Clare.

Sister Anne Kendall, BVM

I’m from Arizona originally and from California now. I got to know Mary Clare in the 1980s when I had a community job. We used to meet at a place called La Casa Vieja and have lunch together for a couple of hours. Now it was not a two-martini lunch; it was just a good exchange of views. One thing she used to like is that I had a watch that played the Notre Dame “Victory March.”

Mary Clare was someone who interacted with the community, but had another life at Arizona State helping people. That part of her life we didn’t always know, but we knew something good was happening. When I would be with her, she would be talking about community things; she was very much aware of what was going on in the BVM community and she also had her opinions about what was going on in the BVM community.

I’m very grateful for her presence among us and the extraordinary way she handled her final illness. All I can think of is imprisonment in the body, but yet she was alert and loving. I was

very grateful for being able to be with her. God bless her family and the congregation and especially the caregivers here at Marian Hall.

Anne Sweeney, Sister

I just wanted to mention that when a 1,000 pound bale hit me in 2006, I laid there for about three hours because I couldn't get up. Bill called Mary Clare and discovered that I wasn't there and they thought something was wrong, and they were right. Mary Clare came down and found me. I had to go to Finley Hospital for about a week and then to a rehabilitation place. Mary Clare came to my aid every day; I wish I could have helped her when she needed it. I want to thank her for all she did.