

Sister Maureen O'Brien, BVM (Matteo)
Wake Stories/Reflections
Marian Hall Chapel, Aug. 28, 2015

Mary Ann McGinley, former BVM (Read by Sister Virginia Crilly, Pastoral Services.)

I lived with Maureen in Cascade, Iowa. She was outgoing, friendly, and a good person to live in our convent which was 25 miles west of Dubuque. The house did not have a car, but Maureen had an excellent rapport with the people in town and would often borrow a car so we could occasionally visit Mount Carmel.

When I think of Maureen, I remember her kindness, also the boxes of avocados and See's candy which her family sent. We lived in the old convent with a plywood panel between her room and mine so every sound traveled. I often said that it was not fair that she drank water with ice cubes every evening when correcting papers, but I was the one who had to get up in the middle of the night to go to the bathroom.

One night shortly after arriving in Cascade, I was sobbing, for my loneliness had reached its peak. The transition from Holy Name Cathedral convent of 30 sisters in the heart of Chicago to this remote convent of six sisters in the middle of nowhere was more than I could bear. Maureen came into my room and, instead of telling me to toughen up, told me that things were not as bleak as they seemed. She assured me that if I gave Cascade a little time, I would love it as she did. She introduced me to the neighbors and looked out for me. She was right. I gave Cascade a chance and I did love it—my time there and her. Thank you, Maureen, for your many kindnesses.

Sister Mary Ann Zollmann, BVM

I first really met Maureen in 1972 when I moved from St. Louis to San Francisco. Over these past few weeks, I've been trying to think how one talks about 43 years of friendship in just a few sentences.

As I have sat with Maureen in my mind and heart, especially over the last couple of days, what stands out for me is her very big heart. That became significant for me because over the weekend before she died when I was sitting with her, she told me that one of the effects of her illness was that her physical heart became bigger. So as she moved through her life, her physical heart expanded in the way of her emotional heart.

I have three little snippets; I won't go into detail about them, but three snippets I want to share about her big heart.

The first one is for Maureen's family, who are very much with us in spirit. Maureen immediately shared her family with me. My family was in St. Louis, so every holiday and every birthday for the Riordan kids, I went to the Riordan family and enjoyed watching children grow up and sharing life with them and also with Maureen's parents. My parents came to California once while I was out there and Maureen's parents and my parents became friends during that time. One of the things I most remember from my time with the Riordan family was a little joke we had about blue candy Easter eggs. When you ate these candy Easter eggs and stuck out your tongue, your tongue was

blue. So for all of you in the Riordan family, I say today that my memories and my delight of being with you are all summed up in those blue candy Easter eggs. I hope you will enjoy some in these days celebrating Maureen's own Easter resurrection into new life.

My second snippet: When I was out in San Francisco, Maureen got this idea. You could just see her getting this idea that we should have a summer program for the children in the neighborhood. The children would come and enjoy the program. Our high school students and the adults would be a support system for the program—teaching, preparing and serving meals, driving the buses. So we put a notice out that we were going to start this program and some people registered. The first day of the program the line was down the street, all the way down the next block, all the way up the next block and down the next street. There were at least 500 children out there. We were looking at these lines of children and I said, "Maureen, how are we going to do this?" Maureen, with her big heart said, "Don't worry." And we did it for that summer and for several other summers. It was one of the best experiences of community. BVMs participated in the program, sisters from other congregations, teenagers, the children who enjoyed the program as well the adults of the parish.

Finally, my last experience of Maureen's big heart has been since she moved here. One of my favorite experiences with Maureen was having a meal with her in the Caritas dining room or one of those famous Sunday socials. Every time we sat down at the table, Maureen expanded the conversation to include something from the world, something from the church, something big beyond us that was going on.

When I think of Maureen, I also think about just a few hours before she died on Sunday. There was another BVM in the room who said, "Maureen, are you afraid?" She smiled her big smile and said, "No, I'm looking forward to the next adventure of love." The way that I image it now is that her big heart has now found a home in the infinitely big heart of God. So, Maureen, in your own words: "Thank you. God bless. Love you lots."

Stephanie Salter

I was a long time parishioner at St. Paul in San Francisco and I am a writer and a journalist. I started thinking about Maureen and the words that popped into my head. She was a San Franciscan. She was Irish. She was a teacher. She was a feminist. She was an advocate for the poor. She was an animal lover. She was a fierce friend of the earth, so natural burial? Of course she did.

She was a game gal for almost anything. I am so happy that that picture of Maureen in the full habit, with sunglasses no less, and on a horse is on display. I remember her on a trip that we all took to Lake Tahoe. I was doing some pretentious meditating, sitting on top of the picnic table in the lotus position and looking out at the lake. Mo said, "Let me try that." And she did it! She climbed up on that picnic table and got her legs all wrapped around each other and sat there and meditated on the lake.

She was also brave. I was involved in a long series about tremendous corruption in the Archdiocese of San Francisco. We interviewed scores and scores of wronged parishioners from

various parishes in the archdiocese. Only three allowed us to use their names in the newspaper and Maureen was one of them.

I don't want anybody to think that I think Mo was perfect, because she wasn't. She could be very, very bossy. I realized today that she was born without that gene that allows human beings to make a long story short. But she owned her imperfections and often used them and herself as the object of her own jokes which wipes away the imperfections. The word that really came to me this morning was pastor. Maureen was a pastor. At St. Paul, when we were going through our very, very dark time and our official pastor got lost big time on the dark side, Mo consoled us and listened to us and she preached and she gave respect to our anger and our sense of deep betrayal. Throughout her whole time there, she made the rounds, always stopping to give individual attention, saying your name, every kid, every geezer, and every single person in the parish. Our problems were her problems to solve or at least to mediate. She heard our confessions, mine anyway. She always reminded us that God loved us no matter what.

I thought about her today. She was Bing Crosby as Father O'Malley in *Going My Way* and *The Bells of St. Mary's* except she was Sister O'Brien and not Father O'Malley. She kept pastoring here. I watched her when I came to visit. Even though she wasn't as capacitated as she had been, she was doing the same thing with her BVM sisters, with the sisters in memory care or on their way to memory care, and with the staff. She would greet them by name, she wanted to know what their problems were, she really wanted to know, and she would really listen. They knew that she would pray for them even if she couldn't solve their problems.

I can just hear and see her coming to me and countless others and saying, "Hey, how are you doing?" As a recipient of it, you knew she really, really wanted to know. I still can't wrap my mind around the fact that she is actually physically gone. I guess we are all here as an affirmation to say that she will never actually be gone from us. I know she is where she really, really wanted to be— heaven. If anybody got there, it was Maureen O'Brien.

Sister Kathleen O'Sullivan, BVM

I didn't know Maureen except for the alumni news that would come from St. Paul in San Francisco every other month. When we read in the worship aid the selection "Community" that "there are people to whom we can speak with passion," I thought of an incident that happened years ago. It was Sister Pat Lucy's funeral. Coming home from Holy Cross cemetery, it was Mel Mahoney (Patricia), Maureen O'Brien, myself and someone I can't remember, all in the same car and we reviewed the labor history of San Francisco with great passion. I think our families were all middle class, working, union people. We didn't talk about Pat Lucy at all, but with great passion we relived the most important moments. I don't know what that says about Maureen, but I still remember it with great vigor.

Sister Catherine Jean Hayen, BVM

I am speaking for the father of activities staff person Dawn Merges. Dawn's father Ralph was so moved by Maureen's words in the development appeal that he asked the department if he could pay to make bookmarks with her words. They were made available to sisters and staff and his

friends. He told me that after learning about Maureen's death, "I will always hold her words close and use the bookmark daily." Dawn said he still gives them out at the airport or wherever he is.

Sister Eileen Healy, BVM

This goes back to Maureen's big heart. One of the things I totally admire about Maureen happened when she was the principal of St. Paul. I was across the street at the grade school and heard some of what she must have been going through. If a high school girl became pregnant, Maureen did not put her out of the school. She encouraged her to remain in school and keep up with her education. I so admire Maureen for that. I know she must have been getting flak from some parents because I heard it across the street. I'm sure she heard it too. Just that sense of bravery. We expect people to respect the life that they are carrying, but then we punish them for carrying it; it's hypocritical. I always thought that was so brave of Maureen and a good example of her standing up for what she truly believed in.

Sister Mary Jean Ferry, BVM

Maureen was a part of our prayer group here at Mount Carmel. Her favorite thing was discipleship; she kept reminding us that we are disciples. One example that she gave was when we see a homeless person outside McDonald's, some of us just walk right by or we might give them a few dollars and say "Go inside and get something to eat." But Maureen would invite the person in, buy them breakfast and sit down and have a nice conversation with the person. That shows me what a big heart she had.

I also want to thank Maureen for all the summers that she took a group of us up into the gorgeous redwood forest. I'm sure Karen Conover remembers the retreats that we had. Maureen was the heart of those summers, along with her dear friend Jackie (Sister Veronica Burke). I commend Maureen for her faithfulness to Jackie Burke all these years. Maureen's heart was so big and she embraces all of us in that heart.

Sister Mary Alma Sullivan, BVM

This goes back to Maureen's novitiate. I was a senior novice and she was a junior novice. Informally among the senior novices, she became the bat master. Maureen was fearless in leading the troops who were going to clean out "bat alley" to the point where SM Christina would hang up a list of "volunteers" and Maureen's name was always typed on it and the rest of us could sign-up if we wanted. She knew that Maureen was the leader.

Kateri O'Shea, former BVM

I didn't have the privilege to live with Maureen beyond our novitiate and our wonderful visits on our reunions and visiting her here a couple of times. I don't think we can say all the things about her and not mention her voice – her wonderful singing voice. She brought so much joy to our group in the novitiate with all the shows we put on and the music. She just was full of joy and shared it very generously through her voice and her personality. Thank you, Maureen.

Sister Brigid Mary Hart, BVM

What I remember about Maureen was her voice in the Senate. Being a little bit younger than Maureen and in the west area, I remember her passion about issues. Not that her view was always where I thought it should be, but the passion was there, it was real and well expressed. I just remember thinking that Maureen was much older than I was and really knew what was going on. I just admired her throughout the years. Even when she came back here, she was very concerned about the congregation itself - how we were living and how we were being disciples.

Sister Bertha Fox, BVM

Maureen was the one who introduced "On Eagle's Wings" to the BVM congregation at the time Mary Frances Shafer was elected president. Reluctantly, she agreed to sing the solo part, those low notes that only she could do. It was very appropriate for that time. Maureen and I were pew partners off and on. Dodie (Theoda) McGinley, Marion Murphy and Pat Mahoney and I were a little group and I think Kateri O'Shea was there. Maureen would laugh and jiggle. We were in the window aisle and in the front of that aisle which was very bad. There were birds that got into the chapel and had made a hole through the plaster right above us. Sometimes during prayers they would wiggle around and then pieces of plaster would fall on our hoods which was just terrible. Being in the chapel, it was funnier than anything. Maureen would laugh quietly and jiggle.

Sister Eileen Healy, BVM

Just one more thing about Maureen's voice: When she was at St. Paul's as a student, she and her sister, we called her Ann but her family knows her as Terry, were the big stars in every performance through high school.

Sister Therese Jacobs, BVM

I want to go back to Maureen's voice. I remember the first time I ever heard "On Eager's Wings." It was at the Senate at Clarke. It was so touching, moving. I remember making a retreat shortly after that. I was out at Eastern Point. Every day I brought the words and the music and I heard Maureen, but I was trying to sing it too. It was beautiful. Another thing, I lived at Los Gatos and she was in San Francisco. That wasn't so far away and she loved the swimming pool. She would bring her friends, probably Joellen was there and other people. It was always fun when Maureen would

come and everybody would enjoy that pool. Even in the evening sometimes, we would be out there singing to the stars and the moon. Maureen loved life and she loved water, she loved music, she loved people.

Sister Karen Conover, BVM

More of my remarks will come at the liturgy, but with all the comments about singing, I wanted to share one thing. I lived with Maureen for 33 years; I can't imagine a greater gift that God could give anybody. About singing, when I came to St. Paul's high school in 1980, one of my jobs was to be in charge of the chorus, but candle lighting had its own tradition - "Jesus, Light of All the World," a very traditional, wonderful, community piece. Maureen had worked out a way so that the entire school would sing that song. The seniors had one part and they sang it for all four years. It didn't matter if you were an alto or a soprano, you just sang that. Then the juniors had something else and the sophomores had the third part. Whatever part the seniors had, the freshmen got so that it would continue. There's nothing more exciting than having a group of young women in a wonderful church with high vaulted ceilings and near the end of the candle lighting singing "Jesus, Light of All the World" in three parts acapella. Once the school was closed by the Archdiocese in 1994, after about a year, the alumni said, "We have to do this again." That tradition continues there December after December. Now there are all sorts of people who sing "Jesus, Light of All the World." This is one of the things I remember about her singing. When I came, she thought I was a better guitarist than she. Actually, she razzed me about it a lot because she said I wouldn't let her play. But that gift of song and music she so loved. I believe it truly marks us as a community and it certainly marked her life with her lady tenor voice.