

Remembering

Mary Janice (Nivard) Soleau, IHM

June 1, 1925 – Nov. 14, 2011



“I have come that you may have life, life in abundance... As I have loved you, you also should love one another” - two powerful lines from the Gospel of John that speak to the life of Jan Soleau. Jan knew herself to be gifted with life; she was about living life fully. Jan knew herself to be loved; she was about loving others as she had been loved.

Relationships were at the heart of Jan’s life, beginning with her family. Jan loved her family. Their pictures were all near at hand and she proudly told you about the arrival of each new addition to the family. In a special journal she kept, there are pictures of her parents, Doras and Martha Soleau, and one of the three young girls, Beth, Jan and Donna, simply labeled “Sisters.” There is a handwritten card from her mother, Jan’s graduation picture, another with a childhood friend, and a clipped news article about how her father, the Monroe City Clerk at the time, started a relief fund for the families of the 78 coal miners missing in West Virginia, the result of a tragic mining accident – all treasured memories of early experiences with her family where lessons of loving and living were learned, seeds of faith planted, values instilled about compassion and reaching out in concern for others.

This same journal contains pictures of friends, notes received, copies of Psalms she loved, quotes from favorite authors and poems and reflections she herself had written. Since she shared this journal with many of us, I know she won’t mind if I share some of it with you.

Jan was all about connecting with people. She brought her vitality and love, her compassion and creative energies, her playful spirit and sense of humor into her relationships and she did this in every phase of her life journey, within the context of every ministry in which she served, within every situation in which she found herself.

After graduating from St. Mary Academy, Jan took a long step of only a few blocks and entered the IHM community. Like most of us, as she entered those front doors and crossed that threshold into this Chapel, she had no idea of the unknown opportunities and challenges she would have as an IHM nor of the many other thresholds to be crossed, but she knew that she felt loved and called by God.

In all of her ministries, whether as teacher in several Detroit schools, principal at St. Gerard Majella in Kirkwood, IHM postulant and vocation director, Wayne State University campus minister or as Marygrove alumni director, Jan brought an enthusiasm

for life, an openness, a genuine interest, a concern and a way of engaging with others that nurtured life and led to an expanding circle of treasured friends.

Her former students from Kirkwood twice sent her airline tickets – to attend their 50th anniversary celebration, and again this year to attend the dedication of a new wing in the school. She still kept in contact with some of her former students from Wayne State University. Jan maintained her relationship with Marygrove friends. She continued in her role as a “fundraiser” and a “friendraiser.” This year she was again at the golf outing, spending the day on the 11th hole with a student collecting money for the chance to win a “mulligan,” and later at the dinner to offer the blessing for the meal which, of course, was preceded by one of the infamous jokes she collected and carried in her wallet. We also celebrated with her this year as she received a Distinguished Alumni Award.

Among her closest friends, of course, was her companion of more than 30 years, Joyce Campbell. Together they formed community, grounded in faith and prayer and a shared commitment to living the liberating mission of Jesus. They were known for their hospitality, for their concern for their neighbors in their apartment complex, for the many reflection groups and social gatherings they initiated.

Jan’s compassion and concern led her to reach out in many volunteer ministries at different moments in her life: she rocked babies at Children’s Hospital; she found ways to engage with those suffering from dementia at Riverview; she taught English to a neighbor; she did volunteer work for Epiphany Education Center and she spent a couple hours two days a week as a receptionist at an acupuncture center. Her compassion and her belief that we are all one also led her to become involved with the IHM Undoing Racism Committee, the HIV/AIDs Committee and to promote Prayer for the People of Haiti.

Jan had a zest for life. She loved swimming and biking; she played tennis and golf; she enjoyed fishing and loved walking by the lake. She had a great love for nature. The first page of her journal begins with the well-known quote from William Blake:

To see a world in a grain of sand
And a Heaven in a wildflower
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand
And eternity in an hour

Like Blake, Jan was a poet and a mystic who found God in communion with nature.

This is one of her poems written at Pokagon in 2007.

Sprightly daffodil yields to April’s caprice
Spring snow buries it under brown bush
Early robin redbreast out of place, out of time.

Nippy winds send late winter across the garden space.
It's Holy Week – wait!
Every week is holy week.
Nature plays out ancient rituals
Binding all in sacred communion.
Of all this awesome mystery, this daily replayed drama,
We alone are conscious contemplatives.

It is not surprising that Jan who had such a desire and an ability to reach beyond herself to form life-giving relationships and deep friendships with so many, would also have an intense longing and desire to live in communion with God. She gives us a glimpse of that relationship when she wrote on her page in the IHM Book of Life:

Through the experiences of my life, I have come
To realize that my God is Mother God,
Nurturing, comforting, caring, ministering,
Permeating each phase of my life – through my mother, Martha,
Sister Mary David Moore
Sister Thaddea Littlejohn
Sister Christine Hattendorf
Sister Thomas Aquinas Walmsley
Through my close family sisters, Beth and Donna
Through my very close community sisters, Kathleen McLaughlin, Joyce
Campbell
And hosts of others not less important...

Ah, yes, Mother God
The paths I've forged were not my own
You paved the way, You held my heart
No fear was there to shake my peace
You are my Mother God.

About 10 years ago when Jan was dealing with serious illness for a time, she reflected and wrote about the many thresholds in her life, those she had crossed and those that were before her in the future.

Thresholds

Thresholds are like cultures in a way
But only in that thresholds are like passages from one culture to another
Cultures are environments, habits, traditions, nationalities, and comfort zones,

At nine months I burst the threshold of my mother's womb, a homey pool, dark and safe

I had no choice, nor voice.
At five, I crossed the threshold of my beginning education.
I had no choice, nor voice.
At twelve I crossed the threshold into womanhood,
I had no choice but plenty of voice.
At seventeen I crossed from family love to romantic love. I had a choice, an exciting choice.
At eighteen, I answered a call – I had a choice
I couldn't say "no" to that Voice.

This convent culture was totally strange, everything new
Even the times to get up and go to bed.
I had no choice ... To talk or keep silent, I had no choice
But to keep the rules – I did have a choice
But did not voice my choice.
At twenty and twenty-three I made a life choice
All heard my voice clearly now, "I vow..."
At twenty-four and scores of years more
I crossed numerous thresholds
Some with fears, a few with tears
I had a choice, but kept hearing that Voice.
At thirty-nine, Pope John appeared and how I cheered
His renewal opened doors, all manner of doors
And each door a threshold.

Free choices beckoned into unknown cultures, challenges,
leaving comfort zones,
opening new horizons, wide and right.
I reveled in this new found freedom for years gone by and years yet to come.

At seventy-six still new thresholds to cross,
From a culture of energy and vitality
To a culture of decline and less activity
From a culture of big city and many friends
To a culture of small town and new friends
From a culture of intimacy and familiarity
To a culture of many with different mindsets and worldviews
My sisters – so alike and so different.

More big and small thresholds to cross
But I have a voice; I make the choice
And closer now than ever before
The threshold of Heaven – an open door!

And still that Voice, “You have not chosen Me but I have chosen you.”

Jan’s life was grounded in this awareness of being loved by God and she responded by loving others as she knew herself to be loved. Written by her graduation picture that she included in her journal were these words.

When it is all over, I want to say: All my life, I was a bride married to amazement,

a bride taking the world in my arms.

When it is all over, I want to step into the arms of God.

Jan did live married to amazement as she experienced the beauty and wonder of the Mystery of Life and Love in which she was immersed. She took the world in her arms. And while we will miss her presence here, we celebrate the gift that she has been to us and we rejoice that she is now in the arms of God.

Patricia McCluskey, IHM

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