Spirituality
Soul Seeing



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"Well, we did it," my teacher announced one day in May when I was in eighth grade — a hundred years ago. "We finished the work for the year. Now we can have fun." We still had three weeks of school left, but Sister Rosemary had whipped us through the second semester in record time and we had completed all the assigned material.

Fun for Sister Rosemary was a never-ending series of spelling bees ("Don't forget to repeat the word before you try to spell it"), geography quizzes ("What is the capital of Nigeria?"), and speed math ("All right, when I say 'go' turn the page and the solve the problem. When you are finished, raise your hand"). Sister loved intellectual contests of all types — usually the boys pitted against the girls. Gender wars started early.

I felt all this busywork was really stupid. And I told people so — especially my mother. Those were the days when kids went home for lunch. As I ate and my mother did things around the kitchen, I complained vociferously and daily. My mother was — as usual — firmly on Sister Rosemary's side.

"Why do you think it is stupid?" she would ask.

"Because it is," I'd reply. Did I have to explain the obvious?

"Well, it's only three weeks. Offer it up," she suggested.

"Offer it up" was Catholic code for "suffering can't be avoided, so you might as well get something good out of it." Rather than endure meaningless suffering, you could "offer it up" — usually for the "poor souls in purgatory." The idea was that you could gain merits by bearing suffering without complaint and then transfer the benefits to others who needed spiritual help. And nobody needed more help than the poor souls.

However, the redemptive use of my pain did not interest me. I continued my lunchtime assaults on Sister Rosemary. Several times, my mother warned me that she didn't want hear any more about it. But I kept it up.

One day, after a morning of supposedly "fun" quizzes, I launched a full-scale attack on the "stupid" way we were wasting time. I was sitting at the table eating a

sandwich, and my mother was washing some dishes. She had her back to me, but I noticed her shoulders suddenly arch and move up toward her ears.

I had gotten to her, and I felt a sense of triumph.

But then her shoulders relaxed. Without turning around, she said, "It'll just take a minute."

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She went into the bedroom and came out wearing a sweater. "Down in the basement," she ordered.

I wanted to ask what was going on, but for once in my young life, I thought I had best keep my mouth shut.

In the basement, my mother pulled out her golf clubs. "Let's go," she said.

Totally confused, I picked up my own clubs and followed behind her. I was having trouble fathoming what was happening. It looked as if I was skipping school to play golf — with my mother no less. She was playing the person feared by every Catholic youth of the time: She was being a "bad companion," luring me away from responsibility.

We lived only six blocks from Columbus Park, a nine-hole Park District course. It cost a quarter for kids and 75 cents for adults. As we were walking over to the course, my mother chatted away about this and that. But she did not say one word about school or quizzes or Sister Rosemary or what we were doing. I kept quiet, waiting for another very large shoe to fall.

On the fourth hole, my mother was about to putt. She had a four-footer. I was holding the flag and waiting. She looked up from the ball and said, "We won't tell anybody about this." Then she smiled.

She made the putt.

Such is the way of kindness.

[John Shea's latest book is *Seeing Haloes*. This story is from his book *Stories* (ACTA Publications). All the Soul Seeing columns can be found at

NCRonline.org/blogs/soul-seeing.]

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