Opinion
Soul Seeing
Voices of Sisters
Religious Life



(Unsplash/Kirk Cameron)

by Sr. Elizabeth Mary Burns

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Few, if any, aspire to writing obituaries, a dead-end job for sure. When, 25 years ago, I was asked to perform this service for the deceased members of our Mercy community, I agreed to give it a try. My hesitancy was born of the fact that my life ministry in health care did not seem to prepare me for such a solemn task. Now, approximately 125 obituaries later, I gratefully acknowledge this as a life-enriching experience.

The first thing I received on my assignment was the factual unfolding of each sister's life on an index card: date of birth, parents' names, entrance into community life and ministerial assignments. But surely there was more. Who really knew her? What did she enjoy? Singing? Reading? Cooking? Travel? What were her successes? Her disappointments? What can we learn from her? What can I say that will give a glimpse of her soul? A treasure hunt of conversations, photographs, newspaper clippings, scrapbooks, diplomas, awards and sometimes small items she enjoyed to be treasured by those who would follow. Then, weaving the remnants of her life would result in a unique tapestry to be treasured by all who would follow.

Now the richness of the numerous obituaries I wrote during those 25 years lies is encased in the community's archives and I pause to remember the life-giving spirits of these dedicated women. Let me share with you a reflection on several who are symbols of the love and inspiration I knew in recording their lives.

When a sister I'll call Mary Rose died, I could write of her as a nurse who quietly spent her life in health care ministry. She was pleasant, unassuming and patient as she cared for the sick in several Mercy hospitals, usually in charge of a nursing unit, pleased she could be of comfort.

But few knew her well. Some recalled that she learned to play a concertina and would occasionally bring it to community gatherings for a little singalong. We also discovered a number of poems she had written, some of them published by the Iowa Poetry Association. She wrote of clouds and sunshine, of faraway places, of dreams. These glimpses of a treasured life, of seeing beauty in small places live on.

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A community member I'll call Sr. Mary Alexis enjoyed dancing and brought love and life wherever she went. Who could resist her smile, her enthusiasm? Why did she die

so young? We would have enjoyed her beautiful spirit many more days. Glimpses of her joy lighten our hearts.

Sr. Mary Noreen spent about 50 years as a primary grade school teacher. She always remained young at heart. Her classroom radiated warmth and creativity, was always attractive with brightly colored bulletin boards, a fish tank, games to play when weather would not allow for outdoor recess.

When she died at 95, few of her contemporaries survived, but hundreds of men and women who learned to read and write, add and subtract remembered this little woman who made learning an adventure. To experience the wonder in a child who discovers the joy of reading, the pride of parents when their children really enjoyed school, the knowledge that these little people would build on a solid foundation of the faith and learning experienced here. These were her soul treasures. And ours.

There was an abundance of material from which to write about Sr. Jean Marie, a woman so gifted that someone remarked she could have managed General Motors. She did, indeed, have leadership skills that matched and often surpassed those of her male counterparts. Her ministry incorporated moving in prestigious circles, endless board meetings, difficult decisions and countless miles of national and international travel.

Yet it was not her marvelous accomplishments that made her a beloved community member. She enjoyed simple pleasures such as playing cards or going on a picnic and was reluctant to share some of her exciting travel experiences lest others think she was enjoying privileges they would not have. She once commented to a friend that it was often "lonely at the top." Retirement years, however, gave her the opportunity to be with her sisters and enjoy just being herself. Why do we not really get to know each other, regardless of the positions we hold? And why do we wait so long?

We rejoice and we regret as we learn from these women and their companions who inspire us and give us courage for today. They came from cities, small towns and farms; they did not know each other when they came, but they shared a common mission and provided education, health care and social services to countless people in need. Their goodness keeps them alive in our hearts and brings light to our lives.

Writing obituaries was not a dead-end experience for me; it brought to life a long dormant joy of writing. And looking into the souls of these women inspired me to be

like them. As I pass obituary writing on to others, I can only imagine how mine will read. At 94, that may not be far away. In the meantime, I will continue to joyfully observe, write and rewrite, for one never knows what is to come.

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