Spirituality
Soul Seeing
Voices of Sisters
Spirituality



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I wrap my afghan around my shoulders, or fold its blending colors of cream, purple and rose at the foot of my bed, or place it in a wicker basket as a decorative piece. It doesn't matter. A flood of memories pours through me. This now-fading piece of knitting was done by someone who had touched me, but had never seen the results of her efforts. It was enough for her that she had created something special that brought such pleasure to my parents for their golden wedding anniversary, and now to me.

I am remembering a woman who had a profound influence on my life for 33 years; one whose contributions are not recorded in history books, but in my heart. During those years, this woman, Sister Mary Lenore, became a mentor, a companion, a knitter of hopes.

I had just been assigned to St. Joseph Mercy Hospital in Sioux City, Iowa, when I first came to know her in the spring of 1949. She had arrived only a few months before. I had come to learn to be a nurse and then help staff at one of the many hospitals we, the Sisters of Mercy, managed in Iowa, Indiana and Michigan.

Sister Mary Lenore had come to live out the rest of her days doing whatever she could with her now-limited professional skills as a dietician. Diabetes had reduced her vision to traces of light and shadow. Her future seemed to hold apprehension and increasing darkness while mine was full of expectation and opportunities to serve.

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Because I was the youngest of the sisters at the hospital and had several months until classes began, I was assigned to "take care of" Sister Mary Lenore. Not being sure of all that meant, I approached her door the morning after I arrived and asked if she needed any help getting dressed. She kindly replied she could handle everything quite well.

I was puzzled as to how she could do this but I soon discovered she was quite capable. She had learned her way around the hospital, memorized the patients'

room numbers, typed all of her correspondence and was always on time for community prayers.

My "taking care of" her consisted of giving her my arm when we processed from the chapel to the dining room, sitting beside her at meals and describing the food we had before us.

The most important part of the caring assignment, however, was in reading with her. We would spend an hour, sometimes more, reading from a spiritual book or publication.

It was during these times we came to know and share our own and each other's lives as companions on the journey. We each saw each other's spiritual path as if it were our own. This was quite likely my first experience of "soul seeing," and one that has continued throughout my life.

Over the years, Mary Lenore continued to live in Sioux City, where she helped develop selective menus for patients, visited the sick, knitted afghans and baby blankets, and prayed for the needs of many.

I moved on to serve in a variety of capacities, several of which brought me back to Sioux City. There I was again, privileged to walk with her, sit beside her and share life's deeper moments.

The time came, however, when her physical health meant she could no longer be self-sufficient and she moved to the nursing care unit of our retirement center in Dubuque.

On Christmas Day 1982, she called to let me know she was dying, an unlikely Christmas gift and yet one that was filled with treasures as we chokingly shared our friendship, the times we came to know each other and ourselves in a new light. She died within the next month at the age of 65.

Fast forward 75 years and I am now with Sister Lois, whom I first met when we joined the Sisters of Mercy in Detroit on September 7, 1946. Like Mary Lenore, her vision has diminished to blurred lights and shadows, and my own activities are now limited to where my trusty walker will take me.

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How will these days of retirement intertwine here in St. Bernardine's Home, a Sisters of Mercy retirement center in Fremont, Ohio? How will we share life together after all these years?

Now in our mid-90s we reflect on our calling, past and present. Lois and I are the last two of that "class of 1946" who are on this earth and still live with that call to serve.

It doesn't really matter where we spent those in-between years as much as how we spent them. Yes, they contain memories to be shared, experiences of light and darkness, moments that prepared us for this phase of our lives. We are not defined by others' expectations, nor by our limitations.

Lois has learned her way around our new environment, counting the number of steps to the chapel and dining room. She has arranged her personal space so that needed items are within reach, and her room is often filled with classical music.

An active interest in Mercy community and church developments, issues of social justice and current events are a vital part of her life. Several friends nourish her spiritual life by calling at predetermined times to share books and reflections. I read with her almost every morning for half an hour, then share the 11 o'clock Mass.

My theological education has been less formal than Lois' but I manage to find enough contemporary writings to maintain and inspire deep reflections on our life now. The internet provides thoughts on the Gospel reading for the day and Richard Rohr's Center for Contemplation and Action provides a daily input.

Less frequent writings from Joyce Rupp, Melanie Svaboda, Thomas Reese and Joan Chittister also enrich our time together. These peaceful, strengthening moments provide insights on our vulnerability, our hopes, our acceptance and we just sit quietly.

We "once were blind but now we see" in a new way. We behold life continuing to evolve in each other and in our world. This is a "soul seeing" experience indeed.

Surely, these 75 years of being with Sisters Mary Lenore and Lois have been far more than giving time to read with and support them. Rather, I walk by faith with them on our journey to the light.