

An Easter Reflection



Mary Jane has been a faithful member of CORPUS since her first exposure at the Secaucus conference. She was the local coordinator for the Providence and the Boston conferences in recent years.

Her husband Joe was ordained in Rome for the Diocese of Providence in 1965. They maintain strong friendships with the Corpus of Rhode Island group, the men meeting at The Modern Diner for breakfast once a month, and the women taking joyful part in quarterly parties and events. In recent years, sadly, the group has given many over to the Grim Reaper. They find support and comfort in each other in those difficult times.

About the writing....

After I retired from my work as a social worker in a middle school, I found that I missed my co-workers and lunch buddies as much as I missed the work itself. The people with whom I ate a hurried lunch every day for seven years were the leftovers of the staff- the people who didn't fit into ordinary scheduled lunch times: the school nurse, a special ed teacher, and one English teacher who co-taught a special needs class. As happens with some serendipitous groups, we were a magical fit. Laughter was our main fare.

When the English teacher retired a year after I did, we decided to extend our friendship by taking a Lifelong Learning class together- the subject didn't matter- at Boston College. We found a course in Memoir Writing to our mutual liking, and for three years, we schlepped to the BC campus once a week, refreshing the writing techniques that we had both absorbed in our years at Catholic high schools and colleges, tutored and inspired by Sisters of Mercy and Grey Nuns of the Sacred Heart and the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur and the Jesuits.

We were trained to be good writers, by our own estimation. In the Memoir Class, we learned to respond to writing prompts, and were continually amazed at the different responses each class member would find to a given prompt. away. Eventually, Marian and I took to meeting weekly in my home, joined by Barbara, a raucous ex-Sister of Mercy and George, a nearly- ninety year old

man she met on retreat, and Alice, a friend of a friend, a quite refined older woman.

At several special group moments, several said that the group was "life-saving," and I think each person meant it literally. Until the quiet woman drifted away, and the old man died- without warning us that he was going to do so - and then Marian too traveled a journey from toothache to cancer of the jaw to a hospice facility to death. The ex-nun and I try to write on, but she has taken up the task of developing her dissertation into a book, so the capricious writing prompts have ceased. I write now to entertain myself, "to scratch a brain itch."

The essay here entitled *An Easter Reflection* was my response to a class prompt: *A Dining Experience*. Others wrote of a romantic date, a family Christmas dinner, a silent meal at a retreat. I wrote of those who gathered after the death of Christ, because "the human body requires food, even in the most dire circumstance." I find that when I write, the words compose themselves.. I just follow the lead with my fingers on the keyboard.

Other prompts: A Tablecloth, Power Outage, On the Verge, Birds of a Feather, Following Directions, A Tap on the Shoulder: phrases that elicited essays touching on high school dances, women's liberation, sexual abuse, teenage infatuation. There is no shortage of topics to consider; imagination can take us anywhere, practice and discipline and freedom to think allow us to follow the lead.

A Dining Experience

We hadn't been invited of course, but we knew we'd be welcome even though we are women, and most of the people there were men. These people seemed not to make those artificial distinctions about rank or gender. The dinner wasn't so much a planned event as a simple gathering of people in need of some solace.

Our friend had been through the most harrowing week, ending on Friday with his death at the hands of enemies who simply could not have known what a gentle and loving man they were murdering. After his death, the family didn't have time to bury him before sunset, so they placed him in the care of the funeral director for safekeeping till they could get to it, likely on Sunday morning.

We were decimated. We had gone to see him speak a month ago, and couldn't believe what we heard such words of wisdom, of loving kindness, from a political leader were unheard of. So we began to follow his public appearances, to go wherever he was speaking, just to hear him again.

Deborah and I were not really friends of his, but we were intrigued, and I guess you can say that we loved him, but only from afar. We were both widows, and a bit more free to travel than most of the people in our town. Actually, our neighbors encouraged us to go, and to bring back word of what was going on in towns further downriver from us.

After news of his death reached us, we decided to go to his town, where we knew we'd find others who loved him as we did. When we arrived, we saw that band of his closest friends gathering at the door of a local restaurant, so we just stood there milling with the crowd. When the group reached the number of thirty or more, a man in a long apron emerged from the back of the restaurant and scurried over to allow us in, but he cautioned us that we could only stay long enough to eat, and that we should confine ourselves to the upper room where we wouldn't draw too much attention to ourselves.

Even in death, his enemies could be vicious, and we were too spent to deal with that sort of trouble.

The men took all the good seats of course, lying close to the long table where the mourning meal was spread. When they first entered the room, we saw that platters of oranges and grapes, and large jugs of wine and water were placed all along the length of the table, so those gathered could just reach to serve themselves.

The innkeeper didn't wait to be asked what to serve- he just sent his staff up with a variety of food to accommodate these people. Most of them had been traveling for a day or more to get here to see their hero, only to find that he had been murdered, and so tragically. Amazing that the human body requires food even in this most dire mood, and the wine didn't hurt either.

Deborah and I made ourselves useful by waiting table for the closest friends, who were just bereft, shaking their heads and wailing, "How has it come to this?"

We refreshed the jugs of wine, poured water into the personal cups the men kept tied to their belts on long ropes. We cut up the hunks of roasted lamb and chicken and fish into manageable pieces, brought damp cloths to the table to wipe the fingers of those eating there, to keep the animal fat from rolling down their arms. Men are such sloppy eaters!

Eventually, their tears subsided as they really got into eating, ravenous after all they had been through. After the bread and the meat platters were emptied of food, those of us who were there only to serve were able to grab some meat scraps and bread and make a few platters of sandwiches to pass around to the second tier of mourners.

By then, those eleven men closest to him were well into the wine, and they didn't seem to notice what we were doing. I suppose they were grateful for our work, and the restaurant owner was gracious about allowing us to take all the leftover food to feed the extra people milling about.

A Dining Experience

There were a few women sitting with the men, but clearly, they were important mourners, not just serving women. We could see that they were the objects of much attention, the men offering them hugs and condolences, just as they too hugged the men in return. No one thought it unseemly, for the grief was so evident in their gestures, in their eyes.

This was a gathering of bereaved family and friends, and no one was judging who could hug whom; we were a circle of equals in our mourning. Maybe it was easier for us because we had taken on some work, and activity might have been easier than just sitting there, crying in agony.

After the chief mourners drifted off though, Deborah and I and a small group of those who had pitched in sat together, spent from the work, and numb from the suddenness and the tragedy of it all. A young man, murdered by others who barely knew him, and for what? The man was of little importance, just an itinerant politician, trying to spread a message to improve the lot of people.

The police eventually found us, and they interviewed a few of the men, but they knew- there was no doubt about who had done this. The greater question was why?

The police were weary too. The crowds had been coming all weekend, and the Chief was nervous, pushing them to prevent any further ruckus. So, we got up from the table, let them sit, and fed them too. By that time, there was not much left but bread and some olives that we mashed into a spread to make sandwiches. They seemed grateful nonetheless.

What a day. What a meal. Humans need to mourn, need to be together in such trauma. Thus it has been through the ages. Thus it will be in the future. Death and evil will be with us always, but so too will there be camaraderie and kindness and reaching out in times of need, even stranger to stranger. Such work makes equals of us all, even in our most decimated circumstances. I am happy I was there to help. It was a meal I will never forget.

Note:

Seamus Heaney compares his writing to his father's skill at digging peat:

"Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests.
I'll dig with it."

