

Reflecting On Theresa

When I was a child, I had a marvelous aunt. A mythical, almost magical creature, who lived on the far side of the globe in an exotic location, and wore a medieval outfit, with skirts down to the floor, and a wimple and veil. She brought us small carved figures from Korea, played the autoharp and the piano, and sang thrilling songs, which I only learned much later had raucous, often slightly racy lyrics. Though I saw her too infrequently then, the impact she had on me was profound, not because she was so saintly, but because she was so wonderfully goofy.

Once when I was very young, she came to visit us, with a little rubber lizard in her mouth, which she could manipulate so that its tail darted out and moved across her lips, but only when she was looking at me. No adult in the room ever saw it.

Theresa had an irrepressible, sometimes wicked sense of humor. She loved a good joke, a modest prank, a small wager, and a scary story. She loved the Buffalo Bills as long as they were losing, and she ran a betting syndicate against them out of this retirement home. She had numerous cats, and named them all Precious. (She also once started a rumor that her last cat in Korea, Precious Number Seven, had been eaten, maybe by herself.)

When she graduated from nursing school at St. James Hospital in Butte, Montana, Theresa and two friends purchased a 20-year old wreck of a car, fixed it up themselves, and drove it to California. When they arrived at my parent's house in Los Angeles, my father was horrified by the car, and made her promise that she wouldn't drive it either fast or long distances. After working for several months as nurses, first in L.A. and then in San Francisco, Theresa and her friends drove the car up the Pacific Coast Highway to Seattle and back to Anaconda, about 1500 miles.

And, I suspect, she drove it very fast, because Theresa liked to drive fast. I think she was never prouder of me than when I showed up here with a \$250 speeding ticket for doing 95 miles an hour on I-90. She bragged that when *she* was stopped for speeding, she didn't get tickets (either by flashing her impish grin, or by pointing to her veil—which she told me she sometimes had in the car with her, long after she stopped wearing it anywhere else, in case she was stopped for speeding.)

A woman of deep faith, a generous and loving person, Theresa felt she had a calling to a religious life, but denied it for more than a decade. Eventually, in a classic deal with God, she promised to join a religious order if her mother was cured of cancer, and when it turned out that the cancer diagnosis had been a mistake, Theresa made good on her deal.

In choosing a congregation she looked at a publication on missionary nuns and always said that she chose the Columban Sisters because of a picture of a smiling Sister Fran. She was 31 years old when she entered the convent, and 34 when she took her vows in 1958.

Theresa spent the next thirty years in South Korea, working at the Columban clinics in Chunchon and Cheju-do. Because she left for Korea when I was an infant, and lived there for thirty years, I didn't really get to know her well until she came to Silver Creek, but I consider it one of the great gifts of my life that I was able to know her in adulthood as my friend, as well as my aunt.

She never forgot her roots deep in the copper country of Montana. She left there as a young woman and ever after missed the mountains. The daughter of immigrants from the west of Ireland, she was a patriotic American, despite, (or perhaps because of) living much of her working life as a missionary in a divided, war-torn Korea. She was at one point given an American Army uniform to use in case she needed to escape from a dangerous situation and, of course, being Theresa, wore it to play jokes on the people around her.

Theresa had an air of innocence about her that disguised an extraordinary complex personality. She devoted most of her life to serving God and people in need. She had an impact on almost everyone with whom she came into contact — as a friend, a nurse, a mentor, a sympathetic listener and a shoulder to cry on.

When she learned six months ago that her kidneys were failing and decided not to go through dialysis, the outpouring of love and grief that surrounded her was overwhelming. At one point she said that if she didn't die soon, she would be really embarrassed.

Theresa, my marvelous aunt, left this world surrounded by love. Sister Corona, her sisters in the Columban congregation, and the staff, residents and volunteers here at St. Columban's received her love, and gave it back to her very generously at the end of her life on earth. She told me a few months ago that she was being "kissed to death," and that, I think, was a very good way to go.

Mary Malloy
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mary@marymalloy.net