Migrant Journey of Oneness

also in this issue:

We Are Mercy: Our Newest Voices Reflect on the Jubilee Year

Among Friends: Community as a Profound Blessing, Profound Responsibility
FEATURES

5  We Are Mercy: Our Newest Voices Reflect on the Jubilee Year
Contribution by Sisters Claudio Cano and Jacqueline Nedd; Associates Antony Girlando, Debora Murray and Gina Ruggieri; Mercy Volunteer Corps volunteer Lauren Mifsud; and Mercy Candidates Flordelina and Teresiah

8  Migrant Journey of Oneness
By Sister Kathleen Erickson

13  Among Friends: Community as a Profound Blessing, Profound Responsibility
By Sister Renee Yann

COLUMNs

4  Justice | Gifts of Justice – Packaged in Emails
By Marianne Comfort, Institute Justice Team

16  Vocation & Incorporation | New Membership Ministry in the Countries of CCASA
By Sister Patricia Mulderick

DEPARTMENTs

2  Community Update
Compiled by Mercy Communicators

17  Spice of Mercy Life | All Aboard to Portland!
By Sister Rita Parks

"Dignidad Colonizada," by Rev. Héctor J. Hernández, psylolo@gmail.com. In the United States, thousands of immigrant families are separated, and mothers and fathers fight despair in prisons, county jails and detention centers.
Read more on page 8.
Dear Sisters, Associates, Companions and Mercy Volunteers,

David Whyte in his poem “Sometimes” invites us to consider the quality and dynamic energy of our questions. He writes:

questions
that can make
or unmake
a life,
questions
that have patiently
waited for you,
questions
that have no right
to go away.

On a daily basis, we engage one another with numerous questions for information, curiosity, planning and even amusement. While questions seem like very simple and natural parts of our lives they can also significantly “make and unmake” our lives. The question that we, Sisters of Mercy, posed at our 2011 Chapter—*God of mercy, wisdom and mystery: where do we need to be led now?*—has certainly given us a direction and challenge these last five years. In our second round of the preparation process for our 2017 Institute Chapter we were invited to consider:

What transformation has occurred in us because of the ways we have integrated the Chapter Declaration into our lives?

In the Chapter Declaration we acknowledged our complicity and asked for God’s mercy. As we look at this now, what complicity might we still need to acknowledge for continued transformation?

In probing these significant questions, we are deeply conscious of the increasing violence and racism in our world “unmaking” millions of lives and impelling us to ask ourselves yet another question: *How might we embody the mercy of God for a suffering world in more meaningful and impactful ways into the future?*

Today as we move closer toward our Sixth Institute Chapter, focusing on the most salient and transformational questions needs our constant engagement. Surely we are clear that as this Jubilee Year of Mercy draws to a close, our questions must be characterized by how we will bring mercy to a suffering world in tangible, concrete ways. Questioning where we are complicit can lead us to becoming “oases of mercy” as Pope Francis asks of us.

We are in the season of marking Mercy days of significance as we move from celebrating our first House of Mercy in Dublin on September 24, 1827, and lean toward our original Foundation Day on December 12, 1831. May these inspired feasts, rich in mercy potential, encourage our prayer and engagement toward naming those questions that “have no right to go away.”

In Mercy,

Anne
Pat
Eileen
Mary Pat
CARIBBEAN, CENTRAL AMERICA, SOUTH AMERICA

SISTERS IN ARGENTINA devoted one day of their June community meetings for a Year of Mercy reflection process. Sisters, associates, staff of Colegio Santa Ethnea and other friends and colleagues joined in a day of study and prayer. Sister Ana Stufi presented an overview of the encyclical Laudato Si’ and led the 40 participants as they engaged with the document, deepened their understanding of the interconnectedness of everything in our universe and ritualized their commitment to work toward the change of attitudes and systems that endanger our planet.

CCASA’s Vocation Promotion Team—Sisters Dina Altamiranda, Lilian Silva, Isabel Jovel, Mary Anto, Marielena McKenna and CLT liaison, Patricia Mulderick—recently made the decision to use the Spanish “Misericordia Mercy” Facebook page to “make Mercy real” during this Jubilee Year and promote an understanding of our lives and ministries. The Spanish page is available at www.facebook.com/misericordia.mercy.

About one-third of all CCASA sisters participated in the July 28-31 “Mercy-ing: One World, One Dream” gathering in St. Louis, Missouri.

Laudato Si’ reflection group in Bella Vista, Argentina. Sister Imelda Sullivan is pictured in the center.

SOUTH CENTRAL

TWO YOUNG WOMEN took their next steps in the incorporation process this summer. Kelly Williams was received as a novice July 23 in St. Louis, Missouri, where she has lived with the Sophia Community since August 2014. Sister Phuong Dong made her first profession of vows August 6 in New Orleans, Louisiana. During her apostolic year, Phuong ministered at St. Alphonsus Catholic School in New Orleans.

Sister Pat Coward was inducted into the Greater Savannah Athletic Hall of Fame at an awards banquet May 2 in Savannah, Georgia. The honor is presented annually to “individuals, groups and organizations who have contributed to athletics by leadership, sponsorship or instruction.” Pat’s citation says she “became synonymous with St. Vincent’s Academy athletics during a coaching and administrative career that spanned more than 30 years.”

The Arkansas Women’s Hall of Fame honored the Sisters of Mercy—the only organization, along with eight women in Arkansas, inducted this year. The 2016 inductees were recognized at a ceremony August 25 in Little Rock.

WEST MIDWEST

SISTERS, ASSOCIATES AND VOLUNTEERS donned hair nets and aprons to assemble meals for food pantries and shelters in Chicago, Illinois, thus giving a deeper meaning to the 2016 West Midwest Gathering: Together at the Doors of Mercy. Cheers of “Go, Mercy, go!” filled the room whenever a box was completed. In all, 35,000 meals were packaged within two hours.

“As we planned the Gathering agenda, we wanted service to be an important component,” said Sister Joy Clough, chair of the planning committee. “Many people in Chicago face hunger every day. This is one way we can help them and ‘make mercy real’ in this Jubilee Year of Mercy,” she said.

“The process was well-organized and a lot of fun,” said Sister Taryn Stark, who co-chaired the project with Sister LuAnn Hannasch. “It was the best feeling to see stacks of finished boxes waiting to be delivered to those in need.”

Outreach Inc., Union, Iowa, buys the ingredients in bulk. It provides training and oversight so a large number of meals can be packaged quickly, efficiently and cost-effectively.

Sisters at the West Midwest Gathering packaged 35,000 meals!
NEW YORK, PENNSYLVANIA, PACIFIC WEST (NyPPaW)

AS THE JOURNEY OF ONENESS continues in the NyPPaW Community, the Institute Leadership Team plans to meet with all staff and sisters in all U.S. NyPPaW areas and at gatherings in Buffalo, New York, and Erie, Pennsylvania.


In assignments, Elizabeth Eisenhauer succeeded Sister Jacqueline DeMars as community archivist, while Paul Clark is the new Mercy Association co-coordinator in Rochester. Sister Nancy Hoff was re-elected to the Institute Reconciliation Board.

Our Community also celebrated several recent recognitions. Mercyhurst University named Sister Bernadette Bell a Distinguished Alumni, and Our Lady of Mercy School for Young Women named the school’s new Black Box Theater in honor of theology teachers Sisters Karlien Bach and Joan McAteer.

Finally, Mercy Community Services, a Sisters of Mercy social service ministry, closed at the end of May due to financial difficulties.

NORTHEAST

A “TRAVELING DOOR OF MERCY” created by Mater Christi School students in Vermont, and a specially designated Door of Mercy in the Mount Saint Mary Academy chapel in New Hampshire, are shining examples of Mercy-sponsored institutions embracing the Year of Mercy.

The Mater Christi School community used the Critical Concerns as their theme in creating door-sized plexiglass panels modeled on the Vatican’s Doors of Mercy. Because the doors are lightweight, the school community decided to call them a “Traveling Door of Mercy” and take them to local churches and parishes. The highlight was when the Traveling Door of Mercy journeyed to the Burlington cathedral for a special Mass with the bishop on May 22.

At Mount Saint Mary Academy, the Door of Mercy in the chapel took on a life of its own as school community members held thoughtful discussions about the door’s meaning while decorating it. “[Decorating the door] … is a symbolic message to show that our hearts are always open to God. … Our path to Mercy is through this ‘door,’” said Principal Tami Frana.

MID-ATLANTIC

Mid-Atlantic sisters Dr. Martha Hanlon (left), member of the Misericordia University Board of Trustees, and Dr. Patricia McCann (center), Catherine McAuley Medal recipient, pose with The Most Reverend Joseph C. Bambera, D.D., J.C.L., Bishop, Diocese of Scranton (right) at commencement.

SISTERS PATRICIA VETRANO (president), Kathleen Keenan (vice president), Patricia Smith, Alicia Zapata and Patricia Lapczynski started their new term on July 1, as the Mid-Atlantic Community Leadership Team.

Sisters Lisa Gambacorto and Mary Kerwin, the current and former directresses of Mount Saint Mary Academy in Watchung, New Jersey, received the highest papal honor, the Cross of Honour, for distinguished service to the church and the Diocese of Metuchen. Sister Patricia McCann received the Catherine McAuley Medal during Misericordia University commencement ceremonies for her significant service to others in the spirit of Catherine McAuley. Sister Maria Cordis Richey, Ph.D., professor emerita of English and former Georgian Court president, received an honorary Doctor of Letters degree during Georgian Court University’s undergraduate commencement ceremony. Sister Rose Martin, Ph.D., co-founder of Hope Partnership for Education, a middle school and adult education center in North Philadelphia, was awarded an honorary Doctor of Educational Administration degree.

A child looks at the Traveling Door of Mercy. Credit: Sister Joanne LaFreniere.
Gifts of Justice – Packaged in Emails

Sometimes the cry of Earth and the cry of the poor, which Pope Francis in his encyclical *Laudato Si’* urges us to pay attention to, comes in the form of an email message.

That has been the case with Mercy’s response to the struggles of indigenous peoples throughout the Americas and the Philippines.

Email messages have arrived from a sister in Panama, for instance, alerting us to violence against the Ngäbe people with whom she ministers, due to their protest of a hydro-electric dam that will flood their land and cultural heritage. As the Institute Justice Team, we have responded with emails to U.S. officials with pleas to use their influence to find a peaceful resolution to the brewing conflict.

Many Mercy sisters, associates, students, volunteers, co-workers and friends who had signed up to receive justice emails from us then join in this electronic chain of education and advocacy. They open a message, learn about the situation and with a click of a button express concern to Panamanian or U.S. government officials and banks investing in the dam project.

More recently, an exchange of emails with a sister in the Philippines illuminated the urgent struggle of the Lumad people against the devastation of mining and violence. Just a few weeks previously, Mercy Filipino sisters had presented in a moving dance at the NyPPaW Assembly the impact of extractive industries on communities, land and water. So when an email from a human rights organization in the Philippines came requesting letters of solidarity for a particular community that had been displaced a few times over the past year due to harassment by military and paramilitary forces, we had a bit of context. Back and forth went the email exchanges with the Filipino sister to clarify the situation and the sisters’ engagement with the issue, as well as with a member of the NyPPaW Community Leadership Team who was eager to respond. The electronic conversations continued as we drafted a letter to engage U.S government officials in speaking out for human rights.

We hope that our Mercy advocates recognize that packaged in every email action alert is a gift: an opportunity to learn about and support the struggles of human rights defenders, immigrant families, victims of human trafficking, communities devastated by mass incarceration and more.

We also hope they appreciate the gift of having the technology to respond in ways that in many cases can literally save lives. Since activists often are targeted for repression by state security forces or death squads, showing that the international community cares and is monitoring developments—even through the simple form of an email message—offers a layer of protection, a type of advocacy accompaniment from afar.

We thank all of those who have handled these gifts with such care and commitment. And we invite others to do the same by signing up for justice emails from the Sisters of Mercy here: sistersofmercy.org/takeaction.

— By Marianne Comfort, Institute Justice Team
Our Newest Voices Reflect on the Jubilee Year

Sister Claudia Cano
Antony Girlando, Mercy Volunteer
Lauren Mifsud, Mercy Volunteer Corps volunteer

Flordelina, Mercy candidate in the Philippines

Antony Girlando, Mercy Associate

Debora Murray, Mercy Associate and new participant in the Collaborative Leadership Development Program (CLDP)
Sister Jacqueline Nedd
Gina Ruggieri, Mercy Associate
Teresiah (Terry), Mercy candidate in Guyana
How gifted we are to be named Mercy during this extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy—and how challenged, too!

Pope Francis defines mercy as “the ultimate and supreme act by which God comes to meet us.” For many members in our Mercy family, God has come to meet them through a call to deepen their commitment to Mercy within this Jubilee Year. How have we experienced the call to mercy in this Jubilee Year? How can we harness its momentum for the future? We asked several individuals who celebrated recent commitments to the Sisters of Mercy to share their reflections on these questions.

How have you been called to mercy in this Jubilee Year?

ANTONY
I have and continue to try to look within to see if there are instances where I can overlook pride and mend relationships. I have looked to broaden my volunteering work with an organization that works with people with disabilities. I also made an extra effort at the farm where I volunteer to maintain the cleanliness of the animal stalls.

GINA
As a social worker I am given the gift of being able to serve the community every day. I was called to be a Mercy Associate in this Jubilee year so that I can expand upon this gift with other associates, broaden my perspective on mercy, and broaden my scope in order to serve more of those in need.

FLORDELINA
As Mercy candidate I am practicing mercy by daily praying the Divine Mercy for peace, conversion of sinners, poor souls in purgatory, victims of disasters, etc. … The best thing I can do is to pray that those who have much, may be generous enough to share their blessings.

JACQUELINE
I have always felt called to be an instrument of God’s love and mercy in our world. So I strive to express the loving and compassionate presence of God to those around me by my words and actions. Now I am especially conscious of how, where and when I can be more merciful during this Jubilee Year of Mercy and pray for the grace to be merciful.

LAUREN
During this past year, I have come to find that being “merciful” has everything to do with being present. To me, this means doing your best to show up every day, no matter how challenging that may be, and meet people where they are. In a world where we have the ability to be constantly connected, I believe that being fully present to another person is the best way to show compassion and love.

TERRY
This Jubilee year of Mercy has been a personal reminder of God’s providence and mercy. I have experienced the tenderness of God in my life. I have been challenged to reach out to those who are deeply wounded and discriminated against through my ministry with those who have Hansen’s disease (leprosy). I have been called to be a voice for them and to try in little ways to be an agent of change.

CLAUDIA
I have been called to mercy in this Jubilee Year every time I pray these words, “Thy will be done.” As I pray these words, I am surrendering to God’s movement in my life, and embracing a freedom that summons me to be God’s mercy to all whom God places in my life. For me, this call to mercy is the catalyst to be about the work of God, and to do this work with a compassionate heart.

Sister Claudia Cano took perpetual vows in August 2015. She is currently studying to become a registered nurse. You can contact her at ccano@mercysc.org.

Antony Girlanda, a Mercy Associate, is an associate professor at Saint Joseph’s College of Maine and the director of the Faculty Center for Innovation. You can contact Antony at agirland@sjcme.edu.

Lauren Mifsud just completed her year of service as a Mercy Volunteer Corps volunteer at St. Peter’s School in San Francisco, California. She currently lives in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and teaches math at Cristo Rey Philadelphia High School.

Debora Murray, a Mercy Associate, is a former hospital Mission leader and the chief compliance officer for the Henry Ford Health System in Detroit, Michigan. Her email address is dmurray@hfhs.org.
How can we, who are joined by the Mercy charism, use the momentum of the Jubilee Year to guide us into the future?

DEBORA

One thing that has always stood out for me about Catherine McAuley is that she embodied the seemingly opposing values of humility and audacity. Catherine saw the situation in her “world” of Dublin, Ireland, through the eyes of the poor and destitute. And she had the audacity to take all of her imagination and resources, indeed her life, to make it different and change it for the better. So I think each of us needs to respond, step up and participate where we feel we are called, to do something positive in the world. I see the Mercy charism as a web of relationships, and our role is to make it stronger, demonstrating the web of love for each other and for those we serve. We can only do this by stepping up and offering ourselves in whatever ways we can. In this way we build upon the legacy of the Mercy charism, and in the process, create something new.

FLORDELINA

This Year of Mercy invites each one of us to be merciful towards each other; therefore, everybody in the community can experience mercy. If mercy is being lived out in our small communities, it will outflow to the bigger, outside community. We are then like lamps that give light through our merciful examples. It will be the fulfillment of what Jesus said, “Blessed are the merciful; theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Both the religious and lay faithful communities walk hand-in-hand toward that promised heavenly kingdom.

10 Words or Less: How can we make mercy real every day?

ANTONY

Be happy, be humble, be wise—this is Mercy.

JACQUELINE

We can make Mercy real by living merciful lives.

LAUREN

Just love—everyone, everything, always.

GINA

By listening, feeling, and responding.

CLAUDIA

Free your heart, extend your hand, and lift your neighbor up.

TERRY

By being grateful and a compassionate merciful presence.

Sister Jacqueline Nedd professed her perpetual vows in October 2015. A native of Guyana, she attended St. Mary’s primary school, a ministry of the Sisters of Mercy. She graduated from Gwynedd Mercy University with her BSN and presently ministers as a nurse. You can contact her at jnedd@mercymidatlantic.org.

Gina Ruggieri, a Mercy Associate since May 2016, is a program director at Open Hearth, Inc., in Spring City, Pennsylvania. You can contact her at gina.ruggieri@gmail.com.

Flordelina is a Mercy candidate in the Philippines. She is currently in the Kolambungan community, helping catechists, and she also works in the library at Holy Cross High School.

Teresiah (Terry) is a Mercy candidate in Guyana. She currently works in pastoral ministry, caring for those who are sick and elderly both at St. Joseph Mercy Hospital and Mahaima.
“I believe the people of North America have a great role to play in the survival of the world. They have a capacity for passion when they realize the truth, but are stuck right now in a big cloud of disinformation. It will take super-human effort to break through … so many things separate us from being one.”

-Michelle Najlis, Nicaraguan poet, to a Witness for Peace group from the United States, 1985
When invited to submit an article to ¡Viva! Mercy on immigration, I accepted immediately. I had worked at the U.S.-Mexico border for 18 years, spent time in Latin America, served two months as interim chaplain in the South Texas “Family Residential Center” and visited hundreds of detained immigrants in a federal detention center and a county jail. I thought writing this article would come easily. I was so wrong.

As you read this, millions of people have no home on Earth. Refugees are fleeing war, living in camps, drowning as they try to get to any country that will still accept them. Violence is escalating, and fear grows. Do you sometimes feel sorrow in your very being, as I do? Do you grapple with your own comfort, realize guilt is not the answer, and wonder what is?

In the United States, thousands of immigrant families are separated, and mothers and fathers fight despair in prisons, county jails and detention centers. More than once, sitting across from someone who cannot stop crying has flooded my soul with the realization: their despair is my despair. Immigrants are us. The journey of refugees haunts us. Yet, as Michelle Najlis said, “so many things separate us from being one.”

On June 23 the U.S. Supreme Court announced a split decision (4-4) on United States vs. Texas. The case is about whether Deferred Action for Parents of Americans and Lawful Permanent Residents (DAPA) and the expansion of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) will go into effect, allowing people who have lived here for years to continue their studies and work without fear of deportation. The split decision means the case will return to lower courts, where it could be held up indefinitely. Even the futures of high school graduates with scholarships are now on hold.

A friend recently said she hadn’t heard of DACA. My resolve to inform collides with my frustration that the plight of those “dreamers” is not nightly news, not headlines and probably not conversation in most of the homes in this country. Nor is the plight of mothers and children, including babies in cribs in detention. Am I wrong in thinking that even some ¡Viva! Mercy readers do not know about these realities?

It is a discouraging time for people who care about immigrants and refugees. Continued efforts don’t seem to penetrate the oblivion of our society. Fear and xenophobia block the truth that most immigrants and refugees are fleeing uncontrollable levels of war, murder, rape, domestic abuse and gang-related violence that should serve as the basis for legal protection under U.S. asylum and refugee law.

I visit Sandra in jail and she pours out her worry about her nieces in San Pedro Sula, Honduras. They are reaching the age when gangs begin to take notice. Her brother doesn’t have money to get them out of the country. The next week she tells me Teri, the 13-year-old, was brutally gang-raped and beaten. The parents are devastated, Teri needs psychological help, and her 12-year-old sister is traumatized. Sandra cries.

Presentations, action alerts, lobbying, protests and prayer vigils seem ineffective in the face of relentless demonizing of immigrants and refugees. Where are empathy and the ability to see someone else’s perspective and wonder, “What would I do if my family were in danger?” Letters to the editor decry immigrants for “breaking the law” but don’t question corporate greed or unfair structures which generate inequality. Serious reflection on root causes of immigration demonstrates how things are connected and will also lead us back to ourselves.

How can we support the Mercy community in Honduras,
where resisters who speak out against government oppression and destructive corporate mining practices are murdered? Violence with impunity epitomizes a government out of control, yet it still receives U.S. funding. How can we resist our government’s complicity in that situation?

“When the people of the United States realize the power they have, change will happen.”
- Honduran Mercy Associate to Election International Observers, 2014

The journey of oneness of humanity—and of the Mercy community—reflects the amazing time in which we live. It is a time of great potential and even urgency, of rapid and extreme change. Technology allows humans to know what is happening as it happens. Images on radio and TV enter our awareness, and phrases such as “vine and branches,” “common good” and “what you do to the least of these . . .” come to mind. An evolving scientific and spiritual understanding of an interconnected universe demonstrates that we are on a journey of evolutionary consciousness.

I tell detained immigrants “You are not alone. Many of us are working on your behalf. Your strength is within. You find God within.” The desperation of people who have lost everything calls each of us to consider who we are, where we find inner strength, what we believe. Recognizing that what each person does has an impact on the whole, how might we share our efforts and our faith journey more widely? The complexity of issues like immigration calls us to witness by our response and to focus on what women religious and their broader communities have to offer in at least two areas.

The first is to explore what scientists, spiritual writers and theologians are articulating about oneness; to ask ourselves how we can embody Teresa of Avila’s counsel that going deep enough within, one discovers the whole world; to recognize that in our time all human beings, not just exceptional “holy” ones, are called to be mystics. In his book, Untethered Soul, Michael Singer reminds us, “There is an ocean of love behind all the fear and pain.” Humanity will learn that truth together or not at all. As we evolve, we need to grapple with changes in spirituality and faith systems which separate us. We may be called to become “sacred activists,” as the mystic Andrew Harvey suggests.

Secondly, believing that because each effort adds to the whole, let’s get very specific about actions. From our place of relative privilege, comfort and safety, we have great words, strong statements, Critical Concerns and marvelous ministry experience. The 2011 Chapter Declaration reminds us that we are led “to liberate and redistribute our human and financial resources across the Institute and develop creative solutions to unmet needs, acting in solidarity with impoverished peoples.” Does that translate to sponsoring refugee families or providing sanctuary for immigrants? We need to talk with one another about how difficult and complex those actions would be, and yet how needed!

Individually we need to clarify what we are willing to give up so that others have enough, and how involved we

*“La Niña Serrilla,” by Rev. Héctor Hernández, poyolo@gmail.com*
For the Immigrant

This excerpted poem was written by Menya (last name withheld), an asylum seeker from Kenya who is being held in detention in the United States. Read Menya’s poem in its entirety at bit.ly/ForTheImmigrant

To immigration I am just another file to be closed quickly
To immigration I am just an alien number to be tossed away
How I wish and pray you could look deeper on who I am
I am a human being like you
A human being born into love
Look deeper and maybe you might
Learn something about me
If you look deeper I can teach you love. I can teach you kindness
Look deeper and if you took time to listen to me, I am a human being just like you.

“For a new world, we need new mass feelings, and the feelings of the masses do not evolve except under worldwide reactions. Either the world is absurd … Or the world is going somewhere.”

-Teihard de Chardin, 1940

Read more about the Sisters of Mercy’s commitment to immigration reform at www.sistersofmercy.org/immigration.

The Sisters of Mercy have been responding to human rights concerns in Honduras, a country in which we live and minister, since 2009. Learn more at www.sistersofmercy.org/Honduras.


Sister Kathleen Erickson works on immigration and environmental issues through various ministries, including serving as facilitator of the Dreamer symposium and visiting undocumented immigrants as part of the Immigrant Detainee Accompaniment Program in Omaha, Nebraska. She served as an international observer at the Honduran presidential election in November 2013. Kathleen can be reached at kerickson@mercywmw.org.

Join an online discussion about immigration and oneness at bit.ly/MigrantJourneyofOneness

By Sister Renee Yann

We offer this reflection, originally published in Spiritual Life (Summer 1992), to reflect on the vulnerabilities so many in Mercy may feel as we continue on our Journey of Oneness. Among friends, we embrace the liberty to express hopes and doubts; to share fears and dreams; to comfort and be comforted.
It all started at John’s funeral, a young man I had taught in the late 1970s. Now, 10 years later, he had died in a car accident, only 22 years old.

Arriving early for his funeral Mass, I sat in the parish church as torrents of rain crashed over the roof, and I let my many years of ministry there flood though my memory. For more than a decade, I had been incorporated into the lives of families like John’s, the way ink soaks into a blotter. For a slice of time, their stories and mine were so closely knit that it had been possible for me to say, do or be something that could influence their entire lives.

Even as I engaged this overwhelming thought, it took flesh as Sister Beth Flannery, another of my former students, came into church and sat beside me—Beth, who had become a Sister of Mercy; Beth, who had entered community with me.

See, that’s what this story is really about—community—and a few amazingly simple incidents that brought its meaning home to me in a way that I had never experienced before.

For the whole week after John’s funeral, winds and rains from the fringe of Hurricane Hugo inundated us. A heavy, sunless feeling began to invade people, at least it began to invade me, already primed for “the shadows” by having witnessed and internalized the noble grief of John’s very faithful, Catholic family.

About a week-and-a-half after I had sat in that rain-buffeted church, I went to volunteer at McAuley, our community retirement home. It was still dark and chilly when I left the house that morning, rather disgruntled. It seemed like a new chapter was falling over recent events, but at that hour and temperature, it didn’t seem a particularly inviting chapter!

After initial morning tasks, the three other members of our crew went to join the McAuley community at Mass, but I decided to forego that, since I had been to a late Saturday evening Mass. Besides, I knew I needed a little space to let this rather significant strain of negativity surface in me and be tested for its cause. I sat quietly in a light-soaked window as the late rising sun nearly blinded me. From a short distance away, the melody of hymns wafted toward me, mixing young and aged voices in an indistinguishable interplay I had always loved. Wordlessly, but not easily, I began to uncurl before this warming, melodious God all the curled circles of pain that had gathered in me since John’s funeral: premature death, undeserved suffering, the impermanence of our efforts, the burden of aging, the smallness of my own heart to engage life with the nobility I would like.

Still, I knew that somewhere in this day just beginning, there would be signs of grace for me to enter that would help me come to peace around all the imperceptible causes of my unrest. For the next 10 hours a deluge of those signs washed over me, disguised in insignificance, but miraculously revealed to me through the energy of that morning reflection.

The first sign came from Sister Dolores Drislane, the sister who had been in our community longer than anybody else. She had been my teacher years before when I crammed in a Bachelor’s degree in English. Approaching literary themes with an esoteric intellectualism, she had seemed removed in a way from the real world as I perceived it. When I finished my undergraduate work, I had left her in that distant definition. The ensuing years in community had never provided the chance to come to know her as a person. Now, her mind still sharp and fine, she was very stooped, and maneuvered through McAuley with the aid of a walker.

Dolores always wore the full habit—actually, a design twice removed from the current one—complete with cap and veil. Recently, in her later retirement, she had taken to wearing a smock over her habit, almost as if to preserve that which was in danger of extinction. It was to that smock that she drew my attention as she walked up to me.

“I just had a very beautiful experience,” she said. “I was standing there for a moment in the sunlight by that window, and the light through the trees made a lovely delicate pattern against me. Right here near the hem of my smock.” I looked there where she pointed, now a single block of thin blue material in the shade of the walls. She continued, “The wind through the leaves and grass made the light dance against me.”

Suddenly she was extremely human, revealing to me the same wordless entertainments of her mind that I so often had myself. Poetry ran through her. God ran through her, longing for expression, just the way God ran through me. Stunned, I responded with something pedantic, but thought, “Yes, now I can see the light dancing against you too!”

The next sign came when dinner started, a light meal of homemade soup and sandwiches. I went from table to table taking the orders of a few sisters who were incapacitated. As I turned toward the kitchen to prepare someone’s menu choice, I glanced over toward Sister Alma Regina McGrail, the last of my charges whom I had not yet inventoried for her selection.

I could tell by the expression on her face that she was uncharacteristically upset. She was tremulous and distracted. I leaned over to try to get her eyes to connect with mine, but she stared past me, as if groping for something to settle her. Only one other sister, Leona Kennedy, was at the
table. She too was aware that things were not quite right.

After a short silence, Alma said," I don’t know what’s the matter. I’m so confused." It became apparent, as she offered us aborted phrases, that she could not orient herself to time or place. It seemed, as I looked into her face, that her whole life was swimming before her and she could not drop anchor in the present reality. I placed my hand over hers and said, “Alma, don’t work too hard at this. Everything will clear in a few minutes.” This calmed her only slightly. It was then that Leona, only recently come to McAuley, herself moving rapidly into the ominous journey of old age, leaned over to Alma and said, “It’s all right, Alma. You’re among friends.”

Those words fell on me like a flood, which at once obliterates and re-seeds its banks for new life. "Among friends." There it was—all the day’s revelations captured in a few words. After all our elaborate theological analyses and strategies, this was what community all boiled down to: being among friends. This was what the whole witness value of community life was to be to the church: what it means to be “among friends.”

As I gathered Alma’s food, I asked the other three servers to come sit with us at Alma and Leona’s table so that we could help lay out the boundaries of reality and gently encourage Alma back to them. That happened without the slightest vestige of manipulation, because Alma herself said, “I’m having a hard time. I had fallen asleep in my room and when they woke me for dinner, I couldn’t quite get hold of the time or what was happening.” Right out in the center of us gathered around the table was this dear sister’s vulnerability.

We cherished it as a precious gift, and we talked deliberately about the day’s events so that we might offer Alma a focus of re-engagement. Some of us shared our own experiences of confusion and disorientation, generated by very different causes but nonetheless real. Leona talked about how surprising it is to realize you are getting old; how much sooner than expected old age comes. She talked too about how it really seemed an impossibility “to prepare for” old age. We teased a little, laughed a little, said some serious things that were concerns to us, and slowly through the conversation, Alma came back to us, came back to be “among friends.”

That night I drove home to our house in West Philly, where, after a weekend of varied commitments, our small community re-gathered to be with one another. In my heart, I was bringing to that gathering the clear and grace-filled lesson of that day: community is a balance of vulnerabilities, which we enter into in faith and love. It requires the offering of strength in strength, and the accepting of strength in weakness. It requires a trust and an honoring of trust that is impossible without God’s energy in us. It is the unique sign in the church and in the world that we are to live with one another, all of us, as those who are “among friends”—a profound blessing and a profound responsibility.

As I walked into our living room, the smell of freshly-baked brownies lingered in the air. On the table rested a note addressed to me from Anne, the youngest of John’s six brothers and sisters whom I had taught. Addressed to my religious name, the note said:

“Dearest Sister Nathaniel, You will never know what it meant to our family to have you with us on our day of sorrow. You played such an instrumental part in so many of our lives. Your presence reminded us of our beginnings at St. Margaret’s as young Catholics. Our grief is eased by knowing that John is in a much better place now. Lovingly, Anne”

In my heart, I answered, “Dearest Anne, You will never know what John’s funeral meant to me.”

Sister Renee Yann, D.Min, is a writer and speaker on topics of spirituality, mission and ethical business practice. After 20 years in teaching and social justice ministry, she served for over 30 years in various mission-related roles in Mercy Health System of Southeastern Pennsylvania. She can be reached at renee.yann@gmail.com.

Left: Sisters Nancy Conley and Jacqueline Marie Kieslich share a laugh during a Community Day at Mercy by the Sea in Connecticut. Credit: Catherine Walsh.

Right: Mercy Day Mass 2015 at Santa Barbara Church in Guam. After the sisters recited the Act of Consecration to Our Lady of Mercy, the entire Santa Barbara Catholic School community sang a special blessing for them. The sisters pictured here are past teachers and principals at the school. Photo shared by Sister Maria Rosario Gaite.
New Membership Ministry in the Countries of CCASA

In the Caribbean, Central America, South America (CCASA) Community, we have recently formed a new Vocation Promotion Team comprised of Sisters Lilian Silva (Chile), Dina Altamiranda (Panama), Isabel Jovel (Honduras), Mary Anto (Peru), and Marielena McKenna (Peru). In Peru, vocation promotion is carried out in conjunction with the Sisters of Mercy from the Congregation of Newfoundland and from the Irish Congregation, so we try to make our materials inclusive of that reality. We also have a Formation Commission in CCASA which is comprised of sisters with particular interest in promoting vocations in our Community.

At the moment, we are accompanying women in discernment in Panama, Guyana and Peru. The way most women have connected with Mercy is by personal contact with us in our places of ministry and community life. From there, we have had particular success in our efforts to help women come to know us and our life more by inviting them to participate with us in service and community life. In July, two of our sisters went with six university students to Pacaipampa, a rural parish in the Andes Mountains in Peru. These were women who had already expressed some interest in discerning a vocation to religious life in Mercy. The women lived and worked along with our sisters as an opportunity to give of themselves and to live and pray in community. Our Facebook page, Misericordia Mercy, is another way we make ourselves known and connect with young people and others who wish to know more about our life.

Vocation promotion is the work of all of us! This is the message we try to convey. It is about being happy in our lives as Sisters of Mercy, feeling privileged to be called to “unite ourselves to God and serve the poor” (today we would say those who are impoverished), and to extend the invitation to others who may feel called to the same.

Most of the women we are in contact with are in their 20s and 30s. We have gone from younger to older and now the trend seems to be a bit younger once again. When someone expresses a more serious interest in discerning her call and continuing with a process of accompaniment, she is invited to a more prolonged live-in experience in community. This can be anywhere from six weeks to six months (often in three-month intervals to allow for ongoing discernment). Depending on her situation, she will either continue in her present employment or enter into a ministry with the sisters.

As for the novitiate experience, CCASA has an English-speaking site, Guyana, and a Spanish-speaking site, Peru. Our newer members bring many gifts to our CCASA Community and to the Institute! A deep desire to serve those who are impoverished would come to mind first, as well as a rootedness in God. I would say that desire for service orients what our sisters decide to study, where they choose to minister and how we try to live. A gift each offers, too, is a commitment to community life and prayer, as well as taking leadership and responsibility for our life together. We are very blessed in our newer members!

— By Sister Patricia Mulderick, CCASA liaison

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This is a story told by the woman who lived it. She told it not too long before her death many years ago, yet it remains a delightful—and a bit astonishing—tale of how, as the writer of Paul consoled the fledgling Christian community in Rome, “all things work together unto good.” Moreover, it speaks once again of the reminder to the Hebrews of how often we “entertain angels unawares.”

It happened almost a century ago. Consistent with the history of this immigrant nation, two Sisters of Mercy were among those journeying from Ireland to the United States; their intent was to recruit young women to join them in expanding the ministry of mercy in the comparatively young country. Traveling to a Pennsylvania town, they were welcomed into the home of an Irish family whose young daughter seemed to be just the kind of person they were looking for. While enjoying the hospitality, they offered this young woman the opportunity to join the Sisters of Mercy community in Portland.

There was a bit of a catch, however. The sisters were moving on in three days and needed a definite answer prior to their departure. That gave the young woman only the briefest of time to make a big decision. But decide she did. In her generosity and piety she put aside other considerations and, bidding farewell to her parents, she set off by train with the sisters to begin her time of novitiate in her new home.

With what must have been both excitement and apprehension, she gazed out the window as the train passed each stop that carried her farther and farther away from the familiar scenes of her young life and toward an unknown yet adventuresome future. She had made the commitment; her quest had begun.

But the farther she traveled, the more she noticed that the names of the towns through which the train was passing were unfamiliar to her. Puzzled, she turned to the sisters for some explanation, noting that these names were not those marking the route to Portland. When they realized their young companion’s confusion, the sisters could only explain to her that she had misunderstood their destination. It was not Portland, Maine, toward which they were traveling; it was Portland, Oregon.

And as she told the story as an elderly sister many years later, she admitted that she would have been ready to exit the train at that moment. But she did not.

Instead, she traveled nearly 2,500 miles across the continent to join a small community of Sisters of Mercy who struggled in those early days to support a hospital, a residence for working women, a home for infants, and a home for the aged. Through the years, and together with her sisters, she brought merciful service to the people of Portland and, in fact, became one of the leaders and stabilizers of those once endangered ministries.

She never returned to minister in Pennsylvania. Her home was Portland, Oregon.

— By Sister Rita Parks
Calendar

SEPTEMBER 29-30
Leadership Finance Committee Meeting
Silver Spring, Maryland
Contact: Sister Pat McDermott
pat@sistersofmercy.org

SEPTEMBER 30-OCTOBER 2
Institute Chapter Planning Team Meeting
Silver Spring, Maryland
Contact: Sister Mary Stanton
mstanton@mercysec.org

OCTOBER 2-3
Mercy, the Principal Path – Third biennial mission formation program for leaders in Mercy higher education
Baltimore, Maryland
Contact: Moya Dittmeier
mkdittmeier@gmail.com

OCTOBER 13-16
Mercy Associate Leadership Council (MALC)
Scottsdale, Arizona
Contact: Carole Luce
clluce@prodigy.net

OCTOBER 15-19
Extended Justice Team Meeting
Belmont, North Carolina
Contact: Jean Stokan
jstokan@sistersofmercy.org

OCTOBER 24-29
Institute Leadership Conference
Lutz, Florida
Contact: Sister Karen Dunville
kdunville@sistersofmercy.org

"Woman," art by Sister Corlita Bonnarens

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