

Sister Mary Jean Klene, CSC

(Sister Zita Marie)

September 8, 1929–December 1, 2021

These memories were lovingly prepared and written by Sister Eva Mary (Hooker), CSC, who read them at Sister Jean's funeral on December 9, 2021.

I will begin by asking us to imagine Jean's blindness. I know this is a strange way to begin, but her way to sight without sight is one of the singular aspects of her late personality, her way of living in community, her memories of scholarship and teaching, and her relationship with God.

Think for a moment about Jean's blindness: Jean's experience of slipping inside shadows and light; Jean, searching for the edges of steps and cracks in the sidewalk; Jean, sitting just outside the frame of the TV trying to catch the shapes of the players on the stage; Jean, searching inside memory itself to remember the ways in which things and persons manifest themselves; Jean, nose to the page, reading music. I could go on. I hope you will accept my strange invitation: let us try to imagine her blindness.

I think the most awful, even terrifying, loss was her ability to read deeply and in solitude. Her intellectual life depended on her ability to read so that she could use her considerable gifts of interpretation of early modern texts for the benefit of her students and the early modern world of scholarly work. That loss was, I think, the source of the particular grace given her in her final years. I am going to name that grace *harmonia*. I am using the Latin word, not to be fancy, but because the English word *harmony* has lost some of the fullness of the Latin.

Jean's primary grace, the gift she received by living without sight, is *harmonia*: a unity within the soul that comes about by placing all that we are, without ambition and desire, before God. *Harmonia* only seems to arrive in the wake of deep suffering. Isaiah is helpful here: "When the

Lord has given you the bread of suffering and the water of distress, he who is your teacher will hide no longer, and you will see your teacher with your own eyes” (Isaiah 30:20). *Harmonia* is not only a spiritual gift. It yields another intellectual gift, “*claritas*,” the dry-eyed Latin word Seamus Heaney loved: “utter visibility,” “alive”...“with what is invisible.” Think of Jean’s graciousness in the generosity and ease with which she shared her intellectual gifts. Think also of her sudden strike of wit. She wore her learning lightly, so lightly, we could forget all that learning was there. Learning above and beyond her PhD from Toronto. Learning above and beyond even her prize-winning edition of *The Southwell-Sibthorpe Commonplace Book* (Folger MS. v.b.198), published by the Renaissance English Text Society. Her learning somehow remained intact, even sharpened a bit because of the natural shrinking of memory. It is as if learning received a layer of kindness, even in the midst of blind-giving scarcity. A variation of “gentillesse,” that wholeness which Chaucer’s pilgrims seek.

Her work as textual editor of Lady Ann’s commonplace book received the Josephine A. Roberts Award from the Society for the Study of Early Modern Women. Why is the edition of this book significant? In doing this work, Jean joined a group of scholars who were engaged in making texts written by early modern women available for study. The feminist transformation of the English literature curriculum created a demand for early modern manuscripts by women. Such textual work is hard and requires precision, exactitude and patience. Textual work is like that art which Lady Ann describes as “the silke thredd that stringes your chayne of pearle, which being broken, your jewells all fall into the rushes...” (Letter to Lady Ridgway in *Commonplace Book*, p. 4). Jean wanted to keep and maintain the thread from then to now so that the jewels from then did not fall into the rushes of now and vanish.

What does it take to edit an early modern book like this? First, scary smart intelligence; second, very good eyes. Jean had the first, not the second. Early modern handwriting and type face did not receive prizes for clarity. I remember Jean with her eyes nearly inside the screen of

her computer: her fingers moving along the lines of her manuscript in much the same way as a child reads: with touch and a soft mouthing of words. A physical reading. She looked radiant.

Jean nourished that silk thread, the arts of critical reading, interpretation and writing, not just in herself, but in her students. Jean's scholarship was the chain on which she threaded her practice of teaching. She knew reams of Shakespeare and other early modern writers, John Donne and company, by heart (I love that phrase, *by heart*). She felt great joy in giving Shakespeare's seeming "airy nothings" a "local habitation and a name." I remember her long-legged striding across the campus of Saint Mary's College (Notre Dame, Indiana), her giant Riverside edition of Shakespeare under her arm. Her dedication to reading early work sometimes caused students left-handed grumbling: "I actually found myself looking forward to a morning class ... (would you believe?) on *The Faerie Queene*." Her humor and kindness were often mentioned by students. Student evaluations don't often lead us to think big thoughts about our work; however, one thing that emerges in Jean's students' comments is her commitment as a humanist to making students pay attention to the nature of character-making in literature. One thread shows up repeatedly in her work: the ways in which human failure needs to be met with peace-making and perhaps a little wine "that can turnen earnest into game." Alumnae have fervent memories of her. They sometimes turned the faculty hour at Alumnae Reunion into faculty afternoon with Jean. Her *harmonia* was on full display; she was at ease in the person she had become. For her excellence in teaching, Jean received the Maria Pieta Award, the Spes Unica Award and the President's Medal.

Harmonia includes another grace, that of community making. As a Sister of the Holy Cross, Jean was sometimes a mystery and, at the same time, a very close and faithful friend. She had a way of waiting for you to open yourself. One group of sisters, several members of the Holy Spirit class, wrote that Jean, as the assistant to the postulant/

novice director for the Holy Spirit class, saved their lives “during those challenging days.” Her wonderful laugh and marvelous sense of humor made these women feel “she was ours.” When life got truly tough, Jean went to bat for these young women. She spoke truth to power. She was dismissed as assistant director. Fidelity to the needs of the young can sometimes be costly. These women, however, remember her courageous fidelity to them as both mentor and friend. And also, one added, as maker of lists of good books.

How to hold the special *harmonia* of our sister Jean in heart and memory. That is our task this morning. Believe me, this ain't no boogie woogie! Imagine. In her voice:

When I am
Dead, no longer
Mourn for me than you can hear
DA-doo-da, DA-doo-da-da
Then,
Decant me into paradise.
Now, at last, I see.