

# **Sister Miriam P. (Cooney), CSC**

(Mary Patricia Cooney)

May 6, 1925–December 16, 2020

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**These memories were lovingly prepared and written by Sister Eva Mary (Hooker), CSC, who read them at Sister Miriam's memorial Mass on April 27, 2021.**

Miriam entered the Sisters of the Holy Cross from Niles, Michigan, on July 31, 1942. She made first vows on February 2, 1945, and made her final profession on August 15, 1948. In the first hours of December 16, 2020, Miriam died. The convent was in lockdown because of the coronavirus. Today, at last, we are able to celebrate Miriam's life.

First, we have to remember who she was: a complicated, intelligent, daring, funny, stubborn, sometimes irascible, always confident woman. She loved her family deeply; her parents, Walter and Katherine, and her siblings, Kevin, James, Susan and Kathleen, and their children were a cherished presence in her life. She began her tenure at Saint Mary's College in 1950, interrupting her teaching for three years for doctoral study at the University of Chicago. She received her PhD in mathematics from Chicago in 1968. That same year she was appointed chair of the mathematics department, a position she held for 23 years. She received the Spes Unica Award in 1975. Miriam retired from Saint Mary's College in 1996 at the age of 71.

She moved to Oakland, California, where she taught at Holy Names College and engaged in retreat ministry with Sister Irene Woodward, CFC. She retired to Saint Mary's Convent in 2010, having chosen to devote herself to a ministry of prayer. These are the facts, somewhat abbreviated, of her formidable self.

“Infinity is our proper dimension” (Sister Madeleva’s quote) seems as good a place as any to begin. That Miriam worked with numbers is an obvious piece of her intellectual biography. That work, the teaching of mathematics, was transformative for hundreds of students, perhaps thousands. That work was often an act of stubborn courage. Day after day, year after year, Miriam helped students, not simply to learn math; she helped them re-imagine their minds. Transformation of mind and imagination was her TREASURED life-work.

In 1958, about 20 of us were waiting nervously in a classroom in Le Mans Hall. It was 8 a.m. and we were to be introduced to something called Math Concepts. In walked a tall, slim Sister of the Holy Cross. She was rather formal. She did not make outrageous puns that first day. (She saved those for later.) We thought she and her math concepts were very scary. What to us was obscure, she made clear. However, even if infinity were not OUR proper dimension, we were to arrive with ALL our math problems solved. Period.

Years later, shortly after my arrival from England, she came to my study in the convent to welcome me to Saint Mary’s. We sat surrounded by book boxes. She encouraged me to participate fully in the life of the college. She herself modeled full engagement with both teaching and learning: the importance of good questions, patience, humor and robust stability in the energy given to study. She was a stalwart woman, sometimes abrasive, always full of wit. Her quick judgments made some question her fairness, but Linn Vacca famously defended her integrity by naming her “Stainless Steel Cooney” in a rather raucous discussion in the faculty lounge. She was proud of that.

Miriam was a master teacher whom students both feared and loved. What stunned me as I read background information for this eulogy was that she demanded that students develop

STYLE as mathematicians. One former student wrote, “Can you believe that?” I have to admit that thought boggled my mind. Mathematicians have style! Who knew! As chair of the math department, she was mentor to young faculty, fierce guardian of the math curriculum, and cheerleader for the changing landscape of the core curriculum. As the college began its deep dive into the feminist transformation of the curriculum, Miriam firmly held to Seamus Heaney’s famous lines on change: “... whatever is given/ Can always be reimagined, however four-square/ Plank-thick, hull stupid and out of its time/ It happens to be.” She went on to develop feminist scholarship by her work on the neglected history of women in mathematics and by invention of pedagogy for the teaching of women. She was project director and editor of *Celebrating Women in Mathematics and Science*, published by the National Council in Mathematics and Science. Her extensive research on the subject is in the Women and Leadership archives at Loyola University Chicago. She was disappointed that she could not find a publisher for her work on the history of women in mathematics. She hoped others would take it up.

Miriam was a superb soccer player. As Gail Mandell wrote: “Tall and willowy, she seemed to float, not walk like the rest of us poor mortals.” She was a formidable goalie and a center fullback who regularly terrorized opponents on the playing field.

Miriam’s capacity for deep and faithful friendship was one of her finest qualities. She monitored her sharp wit with care, and when she failed and her flashing words wounded you, she came round to talk and mediate the power of her words. Long, deep friendships with Maria C. McDermott, CSC, and Irene Woodward, CFC, brought her much joy.

I don't know how many people knew Miriam as adventurer. She loved to travel. She taught math in Uganda and Ireland during sabbaticals. I remember wonderful evenings hearing about China and Peru. Travel tales loosened Miriam's sense of humor and heightened her sense of being a stranger in the world. And like strangers in a strange land, she sometimes paid attention to the wrong things. At the end of a long hike in the Poconos, I had to yell at Miriam at the top of my voice: "MIRIAM!!! GET IN THE HOUSE!!!" There was a bear behind her and she was moseying along enjoying the sunset. I never saw her move so fast in her life.

Miriam's love of art heightened the contemplative within her. Paintings and poetry and number were for her stations of the soul. Her decision, after careful deliberation, to retire from the college led her to the rugged western landscape, new friends and a deepening of her spirituality. She found new ways to be with God. The psalms and contemporary poetry helped her keep her balance as she aged. To the end she was a master teacher: good, excellent and great.

A good teacher enables her students to learn.

An excellent teacher enlarges the truth by her presence within it and assists the student to place herself within that truth. The excellent teacher enlarges wisdom by giving it away.

The great teacher takes on an additional responsibility: she does not simply teach others to learn; she does not simply enlarge the truth by her own inquiry. She insists, by her example, that her students also learn how to find truth, that they learn how to create a new truth. By so doing, by so living and working, by her support of the new idea aborning, the great teacher changes the world. By the rare and gifted practice of creative

intellectual discipline, the great teacher contributes to and shapes the world community. The gift of the great teacher is the gift of new learning and, sometimes, the gift of wisdom. Like the wisdom of the prophets, this is a gift only she can give and which can never be taken from her.

Miriam was more than a great teacher. She was a powerful intellectual. Edward Said has suggested that the intellectual is a lookout and lighthouse for her culture. Being the lookout suggests a wide-eyed view of disciplinary boundaries and cultural markers. Being a lighthouse is even harder. Active lighthouses have keepers tending their sweeping lights and warning sounds in the night. The lookout/lighthouse intellectual “present[s] alternative narratives and ... perspectives” that “will not allow conscience to look away or fall asleep.” Work wrenched from the thick. An attention so “attentive it is next to worshipping.” In a single word, ardor.

Miriam, thank you for being lookout and lighthouse. Thank you for your sweeping lights and warning sounds. Thank you for your ardor.

### **Travel Song**

Know you the journey that I take?  
Know you the voyage that I make?  
The joy of it one's heart could break.

No jot of time have I to spare,  
Nor will to loiter anywhere,  
So eager am I to be there.

For that the way is hard and long,  
For that gray fears upon it throng,  
I set my journey to a song,

And it grows wondrous happy so.  
Singing I hurry on for oh!  
It is to God, to God, I go.

**–Sister M. Madeleva, CSC**

Note: The Sister Madeleva quotation is from “The Beginning of Work” in *Conversations with Cassandra*. The Seamus Heaney quotation comes from his poem “The Settle Bed.” The quotation by Edward Said is from “Lookout and Lighthouse.”