

*Autobiography  
written for  
Frances Makower*

Probably all of us, looking back, recognize our present selves in the child that we were. Let me give you a brief introduction to my child : 1997

- Age 3: I can still remember playing near my home, when someone asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up. Without hesitation I replied " a boy". While some facts of life had clearly escaped this three year old, one important one had not; that in our world somehow little boys have it better than little girls. I was definitely among those who wanted to "have it better", though it would take me years to understand the fundamental oppression, mistreatment and suffering of my sisters all over the world., and that "having it better" was being in solidarity.

- Age 5: I spent a month in the hospital with a ruptured appendix and began my career as educator. My captive audience was a little boy of four ( immobilized by a broken leg) who had the dubious good fortune to learn reading, math and , of course, religion from me. I had a way to go in order to long to become an educator according to the mind of Madeleine Sophie and the Heart of Jesus.

-Age 6: By this time I already knew that red-headed, freckle-faced, left-handed little girls were God's gift to humanity. That I had been born into an Irish-American, Roman catholic family only added to the glory. While I can look upon this period with tolerant amusement, it does remind me of the cultural biases and world view of so many of us in the 30's. It took me more years than I want to admit to recognize that Abraham's call is also ours. We are all invited, perhaps pushed, possibly cajoled to go beyond our narrow, excluding boundaries to open ourselves to the universal love of the Heart of Jesus.

Yet despite all I have said, I must admit to having many advantages in my life. I was born in the United States, in the region of New England, in the state of Vermont, the eldest of seven children. It is an area of great natural beauty and I grew up swimming in lake Bomoseen, skiing on Pico Mountain and hiking in the Green Mountains. In my family I was extremely blessed. It was a family of several "devotions", but of so much more. We made the nine First Fridays in honor of the Sacred Heart and prayed the family rosary, with even the dog in attendance; and, of course, were devotees of St. Jude. During Lent on dark, still wintry days, my mother Jean and my father Patrick Barrett (known as Teid) piled the elders among us in the family car to go to daily Mass. We composed our family opera, with its continuing twists and turns, on the way home in the car, always passing by Parcival Duval's bakery to get our breakfast doughnuts. The eucharist became central in our lives and even today when I am home, I go to 6:45 a.m. Mass with two brothers and a sister. But above all we learned by example to love each other in our family, and beyond. We knew that many of our pranks would be overlooked, but never meanness or a lack of caring. We loved our parents and each other and as the years have gone by, we have only become closer and learned to share what is most important in our lives.

At age nine, a decision of my grandmother would alter the course of my life. My uncle bacame engaged to a Sacred Heart student attending Kenwood, a Sacred

Heart boarding school near Albany, New York. My grandmother, hoping for a serious conversion on my part, sent me there. For me, it was love at first sight: love for the religious, love for the spirit of the school, love for the many friends I was to make over the next seven years. While I excelled both at studies and sports, this was not what drew me or made me happy. It was, rather, a time of being opened to new levels of understanding of who Jesus is and wanted to be in my life. I seriously considered the story of Moses for the first time and pondered the words: "Please show me your glory" and the reply "My face you cannot see for no human being can see the face of God and live." (Ex. 33: 18, 21). In my humility I said: "I will be the first." And through the years I have been a seeker. At age sixteen I formed "the 6:30 club". The 6:30 study hall was "sacred" because all the religious were at spiritual reading and nobody could ensure our good behavior except there. So I knew a club was necessary. The only requirement for membership was the creative ability to escape from study at this hour, and meet in the assembly hall. On those days when I was the only one to arrive at our meeting place I would go to the small tribune of the chapel where I would stay in/with/before a Presence I neither understood nor could resist. The God who captivated me was, indeed, irresistible. And there it was, as simple as that. The call, nourished in my family, flourished in the family of the Sacred Heart during my years at Kenwood and at Manhattanville College. These were years of growing and deepening as a person. They were happy, energizing years, in which I formed relationships that would deeply shape and mark my life as a Religious.

When I graduated from Manhattanville College at age twenty-one, I entered the Novitiate at Kenwood. There are some blurs to these years. Despite eleven years in boarding school and college I cried so much that some asked if I had ever been away from home. I was quarantined in the infirmary so as not to upset other novices. and in my misery I used to visit the cemetery on a regular basis, especially those religious I had known as a student at Kenwood. There I would pray (another sign of my abysmal ignorance) for a "light" case of cancer, enough to get me out of the convent, but not enough to kill me! But the God who loved me continued to love me. From Marie Louise Schroen I learned to know and love scripture. Above all she introduced me a little more to the ways of God and helped me to deepen the relationship that has never ceased to fascinate me. Also during this time, intuition (and conversations with some of my novice friends) told me, even in the 50's before Vatican II, that change was in the air, that certainly some things had to go. But in the end my noviceship life became happy, so much so that my feet hardly touched the ground on my vow day, even though I mistakenly thought of it as the end of the journey rather than the beginning.

After five satisfying years in Grosse Pointe, Michigan with a mentor of extraordinary quality, Ursula McAghon R.S.C.J. who enriched my life in more ways than I can name, I left for Rome to make my final vows. There, I was Mother Lurani's English teacher and secretary. We spent many hours on the roof of the Mother House at the Via Nomentana while she told me stories of the war in Italy (sometimes in French if her English deserted her), of the hunger the religious endured and the several times when they nearly lost their lives. I understood the Society in Europe a

little better and loved it much more. Perhaps it was the beginning of the special love I have for the internationality that is ours. Our Mistress of Probation was Reverend Mother Elisabeth Zurstrassen, a person of immense kindness, of delightful humor and of a breadth of vision that was truly remarkable. I have often wondered what might have been different had she been a Superior General of the Society. I saw her again in Belgium after the Chapter of 1970 as she was nearing the end of her life. Her vision was still evident. She delighted in all the changes of the Chapter and it was clear that she had wanted them long before others were ready.

The decade of the 60's was one of the most important in my life. I went to a new school, where most of the students were not children of our alumnae. They were great children, from solid Christian families and I was fascinated by their questions about the why's and why nots of Sacred Heart education. I had long ago lost touch with the educational successes of the 5 year old and knew I was invited to more flexibility, to listen and respond to children with a different world view and new cultural biases, children who became a window on our Constitutions, which ask of us congruence: between our lives and our words, between our interior and our exterior. These children invited, nudged, pushed me to live more congruently, to take Jesus and his heart's thoughts more seriously.

These were the years of rapid change, chaos according to some. In 1964 the Society suppressed cloister and in a flash the Egyptians founded houses in the extreme poverty of Upper Egypt, Peruvians moved to pueblos juvenes (the very poor neighborhoods surrounding Lima) and Spaniards moved to Besos. The Society, in its members, touched the sufferings of our sisters and brothers in so many countries. Battered women and children came to have names for many of us for the first time. The unlanded, undocumented had faces. And we knew that life had changed-irrevocably. If we really do our theology where our feet are, our experiences of the 60's forced upon us questions we had never before been able to ask as a whole Society and invited us to accept, even embrace the tensions that were to become the very air we breathed.

Back in Buffalo I had my own struggles. According to the new theology God was dead and I began an Interdisciplinary Master's Degree that clearly wanted to prove it.. I entered a darkness so great that it still brings tears to my eyes as I remember those years of pacing the hockey field in Buffalo asking God to restore my faith and save my vocation. These were the years in which I could not pray, in which I could only read the bible and hope that God's promise would be fulfilled and that God's Word would be, in my life, "living and active". But if part of my journey was alone and private, another part was communal and public. This was the era of "The Nun in the World" which we were encouraged not to read but which I read and passed along to my friends. These were the years of sharing articles and papers and, finally, of beginning our community book club, using readings from my Master's program to educate ourselves to a changing world.

These were the years when Father Bill Warthling opened us to the burning

issues of our city, especially to those of violence and racism. Before the Chapter asked us to look upon and love the world as Jesus looked upon and loved it, Bill Warthling had brought us a little closer to God's vision of our world and God's longing for a Kingdom of peace and love and justice. Our community joined the education and banking committees of an urban planning program, trying to ensure a better education and low interest loans to minority groups. For me it was the beginning of a process of consciousness-raising that has not yet ended.

In 1970 a new phase of education began for me. I was elected to the Central Team in Rome and found myself being stretched not only by my Roman community, but by my sisters in forty countries on every continent. Many of my sisters were "totally apostolic" as they struggled to make the Kingdom come, laying down their lives for their friends and doing it freely because that is what God asks, and doing it daily because that is what life asks. Their story is another book, but their lives and example changed my life as did our travels to all the countries where the Society is at work. Our first visit was to India and Egypt, where both the beauty and the need of the people overwhelmed me, perhaps the latter more so since I am from the first world. In Egypt we visited a hut, where a woman lay with her new-born child sleeping in a hole in the ground. She looked too old to me to have children, so you can imagine my astonishment and dismay to discover that she was twenty-four years old and had already lost her first six children. In this hut women's health became an issue for me. On the banks of the Nile where genital mutilation is common, women's oppression took on new meaning. Clearly I was just beginning my education. Yet, despite all, what always gave me hope in these years was the strength of these women and the faith of the people met, their desire to live life to the full and to share whatever they had with each other. Once, a member of a Christian Community in Brazil looked at the five of us from different countries and said: "Ah, at last, a world united!".

1975 was the Holy Year of Reconciliation. I went to St. Peter's with Maria Luiza Saade, the Brazilian member of our community, to go through the Holy Door before it was sealed. My knowledge of the implications of internationality was different now. We stood and watched people kissing the door as they passed through, but we thought it more appropriate to embrace each other as we passed through, to symbolize the unity we wanted for our two continents, so divided and so in need of each other and of reconciliation.

If my sense of internationality and solidarity was strengthened in my travels, especially through contact with my suffering sisters and brothers all over the world, my community was a place of friendship and discernment. Under the charismatic leadership of Concha Camacho we were able to serve the Society in this moment of change, but we were also able to establish deep friendships among ourselves, friendships that have lasted and that enabled us then to become a really discerning community. Together we contributed our gifts, and even our weaknesses, to the task of being with our sisters as the Society took a new turn in its history. In my years in Rome I saw more clearly this world of competition, of violence, of oppression and greed. But I saw, too, unselfishness, tenderness and love within families, peoples and

nations. My heart's thoughts changed. I was touched with compassion and became a little more "conformed" and much more contemplative. These were years of living to some degree what we articulated for ourselves in the Chapter of 1970:

"At the deepest level of our vocation this call resounds today to contemplate the Heart of Christ through the pierced heart of humanity. This union and conformity with Jesus makes us determined to be present in the world as he was, close to his brothers (and sisters) and available to them." (Chapter "70: p.45.)

As I look at this chronology, I am more aware than ever that my development was not linear, but rather circular and interactive, and that after my time in Rome I needed to integrate what I had lived. The end of 1976 was such a time when I went to Israel for six months of prayer and solitude. I spent the first three days looking for a hermitage, even asking the superior of a group of Italian religious if I could live in the cave I had discovered in the front of their monastery. (I couldn't because it really wasn't safe...) So I finally settled down in a one-room shepherd's hut in the fields of Bethlehem, where I literally went out to the desert to pray. Because of the danger I had to lock my door at sunset, about 5:15 p.m. at that time of year. Each night I spent the next four hours praying by candlelight in what really had become my "hermitage". I opened my door around 5:00 a.m. and prayed facing the caves in the fields, with their fires, where families were beginning a new day too. On Christmas eve I went to Manger Square to watch the pilgrims arriving from all over the world. It was a scene of striking contrasts: thousands of pilgrims going through body searches by soldiers in order to enter the square, Israeli soldiers outlined by the setting sun on the tops of buildings with their sub-machine guns, and hymns in every imaginable language to welcome the Prince of Peace. I went to the cave of the nativity at 1:00 a.m. with a young South African seminarian and there we stayed until 5:00 a.m., praying for the courage to seek the unity and peace that continued to elude us.

I also had the good fortune to meet several young Palestinians who came out to the fields to study. We learned to trust each other and over the weeks to share much of our lives. I remember one day asking Yousif what he thought the chances of peace were and he said: "In Israel there are Jewish people who want peace and there are Palestinians who want peace. We must find each other and make peace." May their Kingdom of peace come, now.

I walked the streets and rode the busses all over the land of Israel. I prayed in the Cenacle, a room where the Liturgy cannot even be celebrated, but which never ceased to move me. I prayed in the cave of the Annunciation, where are written the words: "HIC verbum caro factum est"; HERE, IN THIS VERY PLACE, God became a human being. I fished on the lake of Gallile with Palestian fishermen whose language I could not understand, but who sent me home with one of their fish. I listened to the Isreali Peace Party candidates as the country prepared for elections. I climbed Mt. Sinai and I went up to Jerusalem where I spent hours and days roaming the city, visiting the churches, synagogues, and mosques and where I hid in a corner of the Church of Dominus Flevit to ponder over what it is that makes Jesus weep in our world today. My Holy Land experience reconfirmed my contemplative call. It was also

a crash course in culture as well as women's studies, and I left knowing better some of the things our world asks us to weep over.

In 1985 I went to Nicaragua, after eight years as Director of Novices. If the meager space allotted to these years make them seem unimportant, this is not true. The young women whom I met in these eight years are both gifted and good. They are generous women who want to follow Jesus Christ. I love them and I know how much I learned from them. I can only be grateful to them for the many ways in which they allowed me to be with them in what is not always an easy time and I can only hope that their lives in the Society will be as happy as mine has been.

Nicaragua is still too close to me to be interpreted. But perhaps we can never really interpret experience, but only listen to it and let it reveal to us the face of God and open us up to the salvation that comes from the other: other persons, other peoples and our God who is so totally other. There is no doubt that Nicaragua has been the most painful, the most searing time of my life. I went to a country in revolution, a country that the Society needed much more than Nicaragua needed the Society. I went to a war zone and on day four we buried Pedro Palma while his three year old son, whose head was bandaged exactly like his father's, looked on. In my second week there I listened to Cornelio, an 18 year old campesino, talk about going to the army, to lay down his life for his people because that is what Jesus says we must do. I think I cried for a week, overwhelmed by the faith and love of this people and my own backward, barely existent Christianity. In the months and years to follow I was to bury many 16 and 17 year olds who had been tortured to death, or ambushed on the road to Jalapa, or shot by the Contras. I was to spend hours with the priests of the parish, with our community and with Esperanza, Manuel, Victor and other members of the parish Council as we reflected over the pascal mystery as it was lived in Jalapa, Nueva Segovia. I could hardly look into Teresa's eyes as she asked: "What will I do when my son's murderer comes back?" Does anyone have an answer? In a world where Peace Comissions and Truth Comissions wrestle with this question, can we find an easy answer to what reconciliation is all about? In 1986 we walked the 325 kilometers from Jalapa to Managua on the Way of the Cross for Peace and Reconciliation. Each day we celebrated a Liturgy and prayed one of the stations of the cross as we walked in the burning sun along the dangerous roads. Each day we listened to the hopes and fears of the people of Nicaragua as we ate with them and lived in their homes at night. Each day we affirmed our faith and our hope that life is stronger than death and that life, not death, will have the last word.

Living in Nicaragua was about living in hope, and I did it badly. Life in a war zone, touching the extremity of people's suffering opened my awareness to all that is unredeemed in me, to what is not integrated and not whole. I experienced times of withdrawal when the suffering was too much and so closed myself off from it. I wanted my own time and space. I was a coward and though I asked for the grace to give my life if I needed to, I really did not want to. We were an international community in Jalapa and we did not do very well at this either. We were pushed to the extreme and found wanting. I felt useless, powerless and I hated it. Only the God who is greater

than my heart was able to pull me from the abyss. Only this people of faith, and hope and love , by the very wonder of who they are, was able to do for me me what was totally beyond me to do for myself. Who can search the mind of God and know God's ways? And yet, Jalapa was the most contemplative time of my life and I have often asked how this could be. I think that there I did touch the mystery of life and death and, I suppose in the end, nothing can be more contemplative than to enter, with Jesus, into his pascal mystery.

In Nicaragua I also learned something more about being an educator according to mind of Madeleine Sophie and the Heart of Jesus, and about being just another woman among all my sisters. I moved to Managua and worked in a Center for Popular Education. Our work was with institution-based groups , in rural areas and with women and men who were exploring gender issues. We accompanied many groups as they discovered the resources within themselves and put them at the service of the transformation of society. We gave workshops in the philosophy and practice of popular education. But above all we developed workshops with a focus on gender. Nicaragua is a country where men often have two or three families and take responsibility for none of them. It is a country where 40% of the women are single parents, usually with several children and no money. In a country where unemployment reaches 60% on the Pacific coast and as high as 90% on the Atlantic coast, violence against women and children is all too common and incest is a daily occurrence. We knew that if we were to serve the people of Nicaragua we needed to take this seriously, as Nicaragua has also done. We did not want oppression on the part of men - nor on the part of women. Because we wanted both women and men to reclaim their humanity the focus of our workshops was on creating new structures of relationship between them. It is a slow work, but so worth while and it has both tested my capacity as an educator and broadened my vision of what it means to share values that are both human and humanizing. And this is what I will continue to do as I return to my own country.

This is not the end of the story, but some things are clearer. The 3 year old now thanks God every day that she is a woman and that she has so many sisters in solidarity with her. The 5 year old now knows that we are the subjects of education, not its objects and that others will continue to teach her. The 6 year old now understands something of the richness and beauty of other cultures and that we always receive more than we can ever give.

In the end, what can I say to my family; to those who have been my mentors, sisters, friends; to the Society of the Sacred Heart which is a source of incredible joy in my life; to my community in Rome and the many other communities that have nourished me, body and spirit; to the novices who inspired me; to the people of Nicaragua with whom I had the privilege to live; to those of every country and race who now people my heart; to the God who ever remained present, even in absence? What can I say? In you all I have seen the face of God - and lived.