

## **Remembering**

**Sister Joel Read, OSF** (died, May 25, 2017)

**Sister Andrea Lee's Remarks at her Funeral Liturgy**

**June 1, 2017**

**Milwaukee, Wisconsin**

On behalf of all who mourn the death of Sister Joel Read and, in a special way, on behalf of the entire Alverno College community, I extend sympathy to Joel's sister, Audrey, and to her nieces and nephews and their families; to her long standing colleagues and friends, and especially to the School Sisters of St. Francis.

It is a privilege to speak a bit of Sister Joel and more than a little humbling, especially knowing that so many of you could fill hours and days with stories of this incredible woman. I am feeling the weight and responsibility of this chain of office on my shoulders in a special way today. There are multiple litanies of wonderful things to say, but words will never capture all she means to us. That her life work, her faith, her ever engaged presence speak more eloquently than my words ever could, permits me to try.

For 91 years, 74 of them as a School Sister; in so many relationships – with family, her religious community, with Austin, Georgine and the Alverno faculty; with professional colleagues, city and business leaders of Milwaukee and admirers across the planet, Sister Joel, our sister with a capital and a small S, created life and energy, accomplishment and challenge wherever she turned, and pulled people into it - willing or not.

Years of exceptional service as teacher, innovator, mentor and president at Alverno revealed Joel's deep love for students, for the faculty who teach them, and especially for the powerful sense of mission that drew her deeper and deeper into the forest of risky educational innovation at the small but - because of her leadership - powerful little college on the south side of Milwaukee.

At Alverno, Sister Joel guided thousands of women toward significant academic achievement and to life and career success. Whether they knew it or not, each Alverno woman who has gone on to advanced degrees, to responsible life choices, to parenthood and leadership in their professions owes a piece of that success to Sister Joel Read, even those who studied there prior to her long tenure in office or followed it, or will follow it yet – enriched as they are and will be by the soaring value of a degree earned at Alverno College.

Sister Joel's visceral love for Milwaukee and for Alverno's place in Milwaukee was as strong and passionate as her love for learning and the well-threaded tapestry of the lauded Alverno curriculum. That Joel was so successful during such a rough and tumble, unpredictable and demanding time in higher education, in the church, in the political arena, in religious life and at Alverno, is surely attributable to her superior intellect, but more to a deeply grounded spirit that played itself out in wise and calculatedly edgy leadership.

During those years, Sister Joel changed her clothes and changed a lot of college rules and took a stand for women's education and the rights of women, all while leading a small college in Milwaukee to national and international prominence.

Awash with talent and disarmingly frank, Joel's energy and optimism became the engine that powered her valiant struggle against the physical failings that finally ended her life. Those infirmities - experienced, absorbed and then ignored for all but her last days - finally took her body, but never had their way with her spirit nor with her formidable intelligence.

I learned that a recent injury with promise of difficult but possible healing had cascaded into an immediately life threatening downturn on Alverno's graduation day. When Sister Carole called the next day to say things had deteriorated yet more, I went over to St. Luke's to see Joel. I had hoped that coming late in the afternoon would give us some uninterrupted and private time and I was not disappointed. We spoke – she with full cognition and as best as she was able - about Alverno; about her work and about her life here. We spoke about the likelihood she would not survive this final assault on her body.

Are you afraid? No, she answered.

Would you like to pray? Yes the reply.

I held her hand – she with a significantly tighter and stronger grip than mine. I spoke about my hopes for Alverno's future. She spoke about a sister whose name I didn't recognize or understand and, seeing the puzzled look in my eyes, she said words I'll always cherish, "Sometimes I forget you're not one of us."

Shortly after midnight, I bent over the bed railing to say goodbye and kissed her forehead. As I took my hand from hers and stood to leave, she reached up and the motion of her hand said, "These days I find myself needing more and more to be held." I felt like genuflecting before such stark humility but, instead, I pulled her to me for as much of an embrace as this giant of a woman's now fragile body would allow.

I saw for myself – and others did as well - that a new depth of peace had entered Joel's soul sometime between Monday evening last and Wednesday, her final full day on earth. That was, along with Thursday, a day that included a lot of keeping vigil and praying and holding and witnessing the silent leave-taking of her much loved sister, Audrey. So aware we were of sacramental grace, speechless save the spoken prayers of our youth and early formation.

On her final day, celebrated traditionally as the feast of the Ascension of the Lord, Joel's peace was lovely to behold - unmistakable and reassuring. One could actually sense her growing

awareness of something beyond, something more; something that was finally coming to stunning clarity. And as the sun gradually disappeared in the western sky, grace and peace were everywhere, even though all was still awash in sadness. It seemed possible – definitely possible - that all would be well. And so it was.

And as the sun and Joel's sun, finally yielded to the long night ahead she "*climbed up out of a narrow darkness onto a ledge of light,*" as Jessica Powers says. That image is so easy to conjure, and together with the reassuring certainty of our faith in the Risen Jesus and his promise of life eternal for us, made that sad night overflow with hope. Our dear Joel heard her Creator and Savior say, "Well done; come in; I've been looking forward to your coming. We need some new thinking around here. I've prepared a place for you. It isn't Alverno, but I think you're going to like it."

I had a clear sense Sunday evening a week ago that Joel would be granted a happy and peaceful death. Those privileged and humbled to walk along part of that path with her, witnessed her move in gracious symmetry with her journey's persistent demands and urgings. Past the kind of worry that the passage itself would be so difficult that its messages would be drowned out by the din of pain. Past the tight hold onto the belief of "*I have to do it all myself*" to allowing and seeking the tender hold of others who she allowed to care for her and help ease her way through difficult moments. Past the self-doubt that plagues us all – "*Have I made a difference? – Do my contributions matter?*" "*What is my 'legacy'?*" Past worry about work undone; plans unrealized; past conversations with friends and colleagues in the 'seen world' toward words with those toward whom she was journeying in the unseen world; and finally to an exquisite leave-taking on a lovely evening as the sun set on the feast of the Ascension.

That long evening visit and those few days following remain tightly knit in my heart. As news of her death settled in, I had the strong thought that, at the moment of her death, Joel might have echoed these words of the poet:

*"I make no guess what greatness took me in.*

*I only know, and relish it as good,*

*that now I am gathered more to God's embrace". (Jessica Powers)*

Joel's intelligence, creativity and determination, chiseled as they were through hard work, discipline, and a deeply practical nature, are reflected in the competence and integrity so readily evident in those on whom she had the greatest influence – the faculty and graduates of Alverno College. Supremely intelligent, relentlessly curious and enormously influential, Sister Joel Read is, and always will be, the queen mother of Alverno College and undisputed matriarch of its large and growing community.

Next fall, I will speak to several hundred new and returning students at Alverno - women of exceptional promise and no puny dreams. I will tell them about Sister Joel; exhort them to go

and do likewise, to emulate excellence, to become strong, good women. Even for those who knew and loved Sister Joel, memories of her will burnish over time, polished in their telling and retelling to a lovely patina, becoming themselves a cherished heirloom; alive with her unquenchable spirit; to be loved and passed down.

For this newest member of the communion of saints: our dear Joel, Sister Joel, President Read, Aunt Jo, - strong and gracious as a tree, let us give thanks and, for the rest of our days, stand in her strong shade.

This is what I shall tell my heart and so recover hope:

the favors of God are not all past,

God's kindnesses are not exhausted,

every morning they are renewed;

great is God's faithfulness.

On the other side of this day, with its invasive sense of sadness and loss, are greater strength, amazing resilience, closer bonds, unaltered purpose. This community, I have seen in the few months I have been here, has a visceral understanding of that reality, which is why I assure you of it with so much confidence.

We know that within the fertile and lush loam of education at this college - her college, the school sisters' college, Alverno college - with each new idea explored; argument defended; artful turn of phrase written; song composed; healing hand extended; experiment complete; with each new discovery of powerful intersections of intellect and competence and commitment, from a place unseen, Sister Joel Read will smile with satisfaction, ever enabling and encouraging us for the work ahead.

Praise God for such awesome mercies.