

Remembrances of Sister Joel Read

Funeral Liturgy, June 1, 2017

By Sister Kathleen O'Brien

I want to publicly extend my condolences to Sister Margaret Early the last member of the sisters who lived for so many years together with Sister Joel, and to Audrey Kovanda, S. Joel's sister and her nieces and nephews and ask all of us to hold them in our hearts and prayers

My name is S. Kathleen O'Brien, and I have known S. Joel through most of my adult life starting over 50 years ago when I was her student in a course on Western Civilization at Alverno College. As a history major and her advisee, I was always encouraged to reach out beyond my own limits which were never more clearly evident than when she asked me after graduation and 5 years teaching in the Omaha Province of the SSSF, to come to Alverno and start the business and management degree program. I told her I couldn't even balance a check book at the time, but of course, limits were never obstacles to Joel – so she said, well then go back to school! So I did, eventually creating the new degree program and spending the next 40 years at Alverno.

I have known her then, in key moments of my adult life, so I have a rainbow of remembrances. It's difficult to pick out only a few.

Of all my memories, her courageous tenacity stands out. We all know of her many accomplishments as we look back over her life. Yet success is never for certain so a story from the BEGINNING of her presidency at Alverno always sticks with me. She was appointed ACTING president in 1968 when the then president, S. Augustine Scheele retired after serving for 20 years. There were a few months between the announcement of the appointment and S. Joel taking over the office of president. She waited patiently for S. Augustine to invite her to her office and begin helping her learn her new role. But no call came. Remember this was a different era in religious life, S. Augustine was something of an old school nun, and perhaps counted on what we used to call "grace of office" to see S. Joel

though. Nonetheless, a meeting was finally set between the two. S. Joel told me this part of the story often, just after she would tell me how lucky I was to get a management degree. At the meeting S. Augustine pointed to four file cabinets, you know the 4-drawer high type and said to S. Joel: Everything you need to know about being a president and running the college is in those files. End of meeting.

So much for management training!

And if that wasn't enough to call out her courage and tenacity, when S. Joel finally took over she found she had to solve a serious financial crisis facing the college. She told me later that because the college needed a large loan to see its way clear, she went to a banker who said she should get a line of credit. She hadn't a clue about what that meant. Despite these hurdles she assured the faculty as she wrote to them in 1968, *I would like you to know that I have the utmost confidence in each of you*. To the students she proclaimed using a particularly favorite Broadway line: *Stick with me baby and you will see your name in lights!!* I have often wondered what kind of internal stamina and fortitude and faith it took to continue in those adverse conditions. We see her many accomplishments now, but often don't realize what courage and tenacity it took and what these cost her personally.

Another dimension that I will hold in my memory is of Joel's -- I'll call it behind-the-scenes kindnesses. She was often seen as larger than life, but on an everyday level, she was very observant and sensitive to the needs of others particularly the elderly. Often, when I was in her office on some matter I would hear her trying to find a doctor for someone on our cleaning staff who needed the name of a specialist, or the parent of a board member who couldn't find the right retirement home. She spent hours chasing down what would be a good solution to each situation.

And here is an example that was very close to home. I have lived for over 40 years with sisters in a farm house on the property of Alverno College and we have all become known as the White House sisters. One year, in the 1980s we were talking about our mothers at dinner and realized how fortunate we were that all our mothers were still living and for some of us, even our grandmothers. We decided to invite them for the weekend of Mother's Day that year -- no easy task

since they lived in South Dakota, Nebraska, Missouri, Colorado, and California. But they arranged to come, a miracle at the time and the weekend was a blessing for us all.

Unbeknownst to us, S. Joel and the sisters she lived with planned a surprise for our mothers. Since they lived far away they didn't always understand what we really did at the college so S. Joel and the sisters she lived with prepared a presentation to explain our different roles and work at the college. Sister Joel always valued living in community and besides helping our mothers know of our college-lives, she wanted them to know of the mission we all shared as School Sisters of St. Francis.

By the way, none of us were invited to the presentation, and to this day, we have never seen it. But we understand that they showed a slide, a picture of each of us, according to those who would divulge even a smidgen of information, explaining our roles and the good we were doing for the college. Our mothers said they were in tears during most of it, and each mom was so proud too. My mother told me would cherish this presentation always saying it was one of the loveliest moments of her life.

S. Joel is often described as a *force of nature*, a strong, capable woman almost a kind of iron-lady, but she had another side to her. Yes, she was a woman of intellect and intensity, a force of nature but she could also be a tender breeze, a person who brought help and care and her special brand of kindness that often went unnoticed.

Finally, a story from the last months of her life that I think illustrates her laser focus on what she saw as essential and characteristic of her own life's work.

Recently a student asked to interview S. Joel on her experience as a president and leader. Well, she said to a slightly surprised student, I think that LEADERSHIP IS HIGHLY OVERRATED! I smiled to myself when I heard of this exchange since it illustrated two of S. Joel's best qualities: one, that she was very good at throwing conceptual curve balls, to use a baseball metaphor, verbal statements that would help us focus on the what was essential or important to consider. And the second point is that S. Joel always bristled at those that would praise her as a leader. She thought the focus was wrong and many a person learned to their chagrin that she simply would not accept their praise. Her view was more aligned with that of

Robert Greenleaf, whom she knew personally and admired greatly, and who wrote the book on *Servant Leadership*. In his view, successful leaders were measured not so much by what they did but by what happened to the followers. Were they healthier, were they freer, were they wiser? These are the true measures of success for a servant leader. These were Joel's criteria too. She did not want to be remembered for what SHE accomplished, but for what WE accomplished.

I am happy that Fr. Mike Bertrand is presiding at this liturgy for many reasons but particularly because he is a capuchin who can remind us of the Franciscan side of S. Joel's life. S. Joel's life was marked by the spirit of St. Francis and her actions were so often consonant with his famous peace prayer. So dear Sister Joel, we are here to celebrate your life with us and say how much we will miss you for your strength, and care, and focus, and mission. You were indeed an instrument of peace in this world:

**Where there was hatred, you sowed love
Where there was injury, pardon
Where there was doubt, faith
Where there was darkness, light**

**You did not seek so much
to be consoled as to console,
to be understood as to understand,
to be loved as to love.
For it is in this giving that you will receive,
it is in pardoning that you are pardoned,
and it is in dying that you are now born to eternal life.**