

Funeral Reflection for Mary Behan, SSJ
April 22, 2024

“Arise, shine, for your light has come...And the glory of God shines upon you...”

We gather today to honor and pray with Mary...

To Julie and Jim, and your children, Christine, Michael, and Sara, as well as their significant others, and Mary’s grandnieces and grandnephews, our deepest sympathies to you on the loss of Mary. Family was so very important to Mary. She rejoiced in your good news, beamed when photos were sent to her, and prayed when there were challenges. Thank you for sharing her so freely and lovingly celebrating her throughout the years. She loved you deeply, and shared your life’s moments with friends. We celebrated in thought with you, and prayed with and for you when Mary asked.

To Mary’s community members and friends in the Senior Housing Residence, thank you for your thoughtful and ongoing care for Mary. It did not go unnoticed, and Mary was deeply grateful for your care and concern.

Thank you to Mary’s friends and caretakers in Framingham as you supported her in her transition to Bethany, and stayed with her when she fell ill and was near death.

Mary--The name means Star of the Sea, and beloved, among other meanings. According to one source (www.kabalarians.com), the personality of one named Mary says that the first name of Mary has made one a friendly, approachable, and generous person. And sometimes rebellious. This is true of Mary Behan.

She loved the ocean and found comfort and solace in her roots of Newport. She enjoyed simple things: a meal with friends, gathering to watch a sporting event or a movie, opening her window to let in the fresh breeze, reading a good book, a visit to Newport or Fairhaven to be with family, reveling in the beauty of God’s creation, a drive to nowhere, or to get ice cream, sharing stories with others, and the opportunity to share deep conversation or sit in silence. And I would be remiss if I did not mention how much she cherished her big ol’ cat, Miss Kitty!

Mary had a wonderful sense of humor, as evidenced by the stories she shared and the cards she sent over the years. And there was an innocent childlike quality in her amazement of the beauty in nature and in her appreciation of others.

She also loved music and deeply felt classical pieces and those songs that sent a message of action or love. The music chosen for today speaks to this: All Are Welcome, Where Charity and Love Prevail, Christ Be our Light, Now Thank We All Our God...

Yes, Mary was friendly, approachable, and generous, and sometimes had a rebellious streak in her as she freely spoke her mind. Over the years, countless people were lucky enough to be brought into Mary's orbit. Lives were changed as we enjoyed her friendship and love and saw the world through new eyes. Through the crossing of paths within and beyond the Sisters of St. Joseph, in her work in teaching, ministry at the Religious Education Office, retreat work, spiritual direction, congregational leadership, vocation discernment work, and in pastoral ministry, relationship was so important to her, and Mary took to heart the spirit of hospitality and deep listening in making others feel welcome and affirmed.

When I took the time this week to reflect on Mary and the readings chosen for her funeral, I reflected on more than 40 years of friendship and conversations. So grateful am I!

As I pondered Isaiah 60, I found the passage to be one of hope and promise. Hope and promise not only for Mary, but I think the passage also speaks of the encouragement that Mary imparted to others which gave people hope and confidence in their own lives.

In her gentle voice, Mary intuitively knew what might be stirring in one's heart, and with a simple question or statement, brought the gift of God into one's life, and helped people discern what it was to which God was calling them. Mary knew that each of us is on a continual journey, and whatever route that takes, God is with us, and we are also bearers of God's light.

She looked to different faith traditions for inspiration, to find grace, the power of God working in one's life, and to seek common ground. She pondered and prayed with people, and prayed for people when they did not even know it.

Mary believed in the inherent dignity and worth of each individual. She took people where they were, without judgement, and was always willing to listen. I still have hanging in my house a plaque that Mary gave me over 40 years ago. It simply states: *“Namaste. I honor the place in you where the entire universe resides. I honor the place in you of love, of truth, of light and of peace. I honor the place in you where if you are in that place in you and I am in that place in me, there is only one of us.”* This is the deep conviction that Mary had in entering into relationship with anyone.

Mary was so good at helping others find their inner strength to do what might be challenging, and to step forward in faith. She did not judge one’s journey or decisions, but held them in confidence, contemplated them deeply, and prayed that people find clarity and peace with their God.

The words of the poet Rumi come to mind in reflecting on Mary. “Be a lamp, or a lifeboat, or a ladder. Help someone’s soul heal.” She brought healing to anyone who sat and conversed with her over deep longings, deep hurts, and challenges.

The Gospel from John tells the story of people gathering with Jesus on a hillside. Mary resonated with this gospel passage because it portrayed the gathering of community, of people being in union with each other, of enjoying each other’s company. The crowd that day was spiritually hungry for Christ. As the day goes on, there is the realization that there is not enough food for the physical hunger of the crowd. A boy with two fish and five loaves of barley offers what he has to Jesus. Christ multiplies this to feed the crowd gathered, and people are fed, both physically and spiritually.

A simple gesture offered by a child... May we never underestimate the power of a small gesture. A meal shared may bring comfort. A tiny light can illuminate the dark. A hug, a smile, a handwritten note--all can do wonders to lift one’s spirit.

In the book *Braving the Thin Places—Celtic Wisdom to Create a Space for Grace*, the author Julianne Stanz reminds the reader that “Prayer is the art of deep attunement and listening—to God and to others. Prayer is a bridge into thin space. Listening to the promptings of God for our lives, and listening to the space and pause between the words—such listening becomes the space where God and our soul meet.” Mary knew this space well.

Mary was not afraid of death. If she had known that death was near on the night of April 8 when she fell ill, perhaps she would have called people together to remind them of what she wanted for her final wishes. And we had best follow those instructions!

Mary also would have told people how much she loved them.

I believe that when Mary passed away on April 9, God was calling her to the thin place first so that she could pass peacefully. She was in the presence of her God.

Mary would want us to continue to seek God, to slow down, make time for prayer and listen to “the promptings of God,” sit with others in quiet contemplation and conversation, own our light and carry that light forward to others, engage in acts of kindness to uplift, and above all, to not be afraid to show love...

Mary Behan, you are, and always will be, very much loved. “Arise, shine, for your light has come.” You now rest in the loving embrace of your God.

Eileen Kirk