

Sister is ever the teacher

By S. Mary Ellen Dougherty



S. Maura Eichner

Photo courtesy of College of Notre Dame

Whether in a college or a kindergarten, in an outreach center or a hospice, as School Sisters of Notre Dame, we offer our professional expertise as well as our lived experience of SSND history and heritage. Although we are educators in whatever we do, we understand that we are the primary learners.

We are about the transformation of persons for the transformation of the world, and in the process we are transformed. It is our own transformation, our own capacity to learn and to change, that shapes the heart of our ministry to and with others. We are all teachers.

In her current ministry of presence and prayer, **S. Maura Eichner** is yet the teacher. "Each Day," published in 1980 in her volume of poems *What We Women Know*, was written as Sister Maura witnessed another's diminishment.

Each Day

*Her face thins almost
as we watch. Bones*

*seem larger – grating
on pillow and sheet*

*like shells on a hedge
of shore. We speak*

*more simply in her presence:
a primer of nouns*

*and verbs. She lets go
of life gently. We*

*receive from her hands
the victory of belief,*

*learning the meaning of
our lives from our grief.*

Those of us who visit Sister Maura regularly in Maria Health Care Center at Villa Assumpta in Baltimore now receive from *her* hands "the victory of belief." She teaches us now as she taught so many of us at the College of Notre Dame of Maryland during her fifty years there, with poise and presence, and with an enormous capacity to inspire.

When I went to the College of Notre Dame as a freshman in 1954, Sister Maura was chair of the English Department. In the course of my four years there as an English major, I had Sister Maura for seven courses. I returned to the college in 1968 to teach in the English Department under her. Until her retirement in 1992, she

taught many of us daily how to teach, as she still does.

As students of literature, we learned from Sister Maura the beauty of the poem, the play or the story, with its depths of compassion, comedy and terror. We learned the power of language with its capacity for rhythm, precision, nuance. We learned from our study of literature the complexity of human nature and the folly of absolutes. As students of writing, we learned to see, to hear, to shape images and craft plot, and most of all, to revise and revise and revise. For art, Sister Maura taught us, deserves that kind of attention.

In her teaching, Sister Maura had both method and style. Her method involved instruction, clear and concrete; investigation, open yet directed; resolution, creative but contained. She encouraged us to think, to question, to speculate. She usually had us write about what we learned, and she read and commented on each paper. She was a disciplined teacher, keeping herself and her students on track.

In literature classes, Sister Maura stood before us, leading us, listening to us, showing us, teaching us. In writing classes she stood behind us, nudging us into our own voices, urging us toward our own epiphanies. Always a master of craft, she demanded discipline with the word, the phrase, the line, the stanza, even the title. In short stories she wanted plots that were possible. In one-act plays she want-

continued on next page

ed tight drama with nothing extraneous. In all genres, she wanted energy and imagination. She wanted art and sometimes got it.

It was, however, Sister Maura's style that distinguished her. She was like a poem in motion. Her presence communicated something greater. It intimated the transcendental, even when the conversation was about the mundane. She was graceful and articulate, with always the right image and phrase to clarify her point. She was quiet and spectacular at the same time.

Students were universally moved by her well-crafted classes. As a poem draws its central image to the quiet impact of conclusion, Maura, always finishing exactly on time, left us knowing (as we do with a good poem) that there was nothing more to be said. Her classes induced the great silence.

Sister Maura was born in 1915 in Brooklyn, New York. When she entered the congregation in 1933, she wanted to dedicate her life to teaching young children, preferably the poor. But by 1943, she was teaching English at the College of Notre Dame, and continued to do that until 1992. Between 1943 and 1992, she published ten books of poetry, numerous journal articles and won several teaching awards, including the CASE award, (Council for the Advancement and Support of Education) in 1984 and the Theodore Hesburgh Award for Contribution to Higher Education in 1986.

In a letter to Sister Maura dated March 12, 1997, Denise Levertov wrote of her gift as a poet:

"I was *amazed* to hear that you are eighty-two. Your work sounds like that of someone no more than forty-five...; not that it is in any way immature, just that technically and perceptively it seems so much... of *now*."

Sister Maura has always been of the *now*, present to the present, inclusive and aware. In a summary of her life, dated Feb. 14, 1993, Sister Maura said:

"When toward the close of the fall academic semester of 1992, I realized – through a loss of physical stamina – that what God was asking of me was not the preparation of another semester of teaching..., but the more difficult task of accepting a new ministry: the gathering together of books, papers and tools of teaching and making them ready for the service of others.

"The diminishment of my resources seemed to come quickly. Of all the emotions that I felt, I think the most profound was a deep sense of gratitude for my life, for my vocation, for my ministry. "I shall sing to God all my life ... always and everywhere giving thanks to God."

Sister Maura summarized those feelings in the poem, "Autobiography":

*Let my heart go – in the will of God – this way.
Let me affirm the impossible
for the impossible is evident everywhere.
Little can be proven absolute from day to day.
But there are: faith, love, prayer –
Indomitable frailties that phoenix
Before and while and after I say
Amen.*

Now in Maria Health Care Center, it is still Sister Maura's style that distinguishes her. To those of us who know her, with her luminous eyes and her stark frame, she is yet the teacher. Her presence continues to communicate something greater. It is as though she is reading to us from her poem "Waiting":

*I tell myself: be ready
to be unready. Sate
yourself with nothing; want
nothing more than that.
And wait.*

And wait. Again, with very few words and only the gravity of her eyes, Sister Maura is still like a poem in motion. Again, she commands the grand silence. ■

AN INVITATION TO SSND POETS

NAMA News invites SSND poets to submit their work for consideration. This year, we will publish poems as space permits. Send submissions to:

Julie Gilberto-Brady
julie-nama@ssnd.org