



NOTRE DAME
OF MARYLAND
UNIVERSITY

Tributes to Sister Maura from Her Students

The following tributes to Sister Maura’s teaching, particularly her teaching of writing, attest to the great influence she had in preparing her students for writing—whether writing careers or careers in which writing was essential; whether creative writing of fiction, poetry and drama or writing of effective and pleasing prose.

Susan Gardner Larkin ’65

The most important course I ever took was freshman English with Sister Maura. On the first day of class, she glided into the room and wrote on the board:

*Clean as a bone,
Strong as stone.
Two words are not better than one.*

Chalked on the blackboard, those principles even looked like a poem. Sister Maura’s insistence on clarity, precision, and perfect diction—qualities characteristic of her poetry—carried over as she guided us through writing a formal research paper and, later, poems, short stories, and one-act plays. Whatever the genre, she urged us to be our own severest critics. To this day, my appreciation of fine writing and inability to stop revising my own work stems from Sister Maura’s inspired teaching and luminous example.

Diane Spedden Harrison ’81

In one of Sister Maura’s poems, she penned, “In writing, nothing is too much trouble.” Sister Maura was the kind of teacher who made students want to reach higher. Her kindness, grace, and wisdom were evident in every class, so it never seemed much trouble (although it might be much work!) to polish my writing just a bit more. I learned during our Writing Tutorial that every word was important, revision was essential, and that feedback was always beneficial. I feel blessed that I had the opportunity to learn from Sister Maura. Whatever project I am working on now, I remember that during the writing process, indeed nothing is too much trouble.

Mary Anne Reese ’78

In our contemporary culture, marked as it is by scarcity and limits, I am often tempted to believe that time spent on creative writing is “wasted”—that it should be spent on something “more practical.” In this milieu, I am grateful to have the example and encouragement of Sister Maura as a countervailing voice in my imagination.

Sister Maura worked tirelessly in the classroom and in the community. She knew, however, that she was given a rare gift; she did not hesitate to devote time and resources to developing and using it. She attended writers’ retreats, she submitted work for publication, she gave readings and she cultivated literary friendships. Most importantly, Sister Maura wrote.

Under Sister Maura’s leadership and example, students in the Notre Dame English Department during the 1970s were given the clear message that the many hours we spent writing creative pieces were not wasted. We were doing the most valuable work we could. I came away from Notre Dame conscious that my creative life matters. That awareness has carried me through all the decades since.

Sister Maura also engaged the life of the world in what she wrote. She took risks and no subject matter seemed off-limits. Her poems took readers inside the experience of an anti-poverty worker, an abused child, the witnesses to a wedding, those who mourned a crime victim. I remember her describing in class the negative response she received for a poem about Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas. She also took readers inside her own life's journey—her faith, her life in family and in the School Sister of Notre Dame, and her struggles and joy. Sister Maura told the truth.

Although at age twenty-one I lacked anything approaching that level of reflectivity or ability to take risks, I noticed Sister Maura's example and carried it with me. Over the years, I have found myself with growing courage to engage both the world and my own life in my writing. Sister Maura's influence continues to draw me deeper.

Caryn Coyle '75

Sister Maura had a calm, humble presence that I always admired. She was elegant in everything she said and wrote and I remember her nodding encouragement for all of us who thought we wanted to write.

Pat Montley '65

As an undergraduate in Sister Maura's rigorous writing classes, I was assigned to write poetry in a wide variety of forms from Japanese haiku to French villanelle, from the sonnets of Petrarch and Shakespeare to the terza rima of Dante, from perfect rhyme to slant rhyme to no rhyme. I was challenged to develop my powers of observation, to make friends with quiet reflection, to write and rewrite. I was encouraged to create a "body of work"...some thirty poems which became my senior English thesis. Looking back on that collection now, I can see promise and passion and craft, though much of the content seems understandably simplistic. I am reminded of the lament of one of my classmates: "But Sister, I don't really have anything to write about." And of Sister's response: "Someday you will. And you'll have the tools to do it." A promise I was later to make to my own creative writing students who voiced the same lament when I tried to give them the same tools.

Though I began my venture into creative writing as a poet, it was as a playwright that I found my true calling. Much of the responsibility for that, too, is Sister Maura's for it was her charismatically taught drama classes that made me fall in love with Sophocles and Shakespeare and Shaw and the rest of the classic and modern dramatists who would teach me how to write plays. When I got to graduate school and took the dramatic literature classes required for my Ph.D in theatre, I discovered I had already read—and written essays about—most of the plays on the syllabi.

But the most important thing Sister Maura gave me was her example. She demonstrated that one could be both a committed writer and a good teacher. The lesson was learned (and taught?) unconsciously. She simply did both so I never questioned their compatibility—not even when I later experienced professors dedicated to their own work at the expense of their students. She was a creative teacher whose passion for her subject electrified her lectures; she was a dedicated teacher who carefully critiqued student work; she was a challenging teacher who demanded as much of her students as she did of herself. It was a model I tried to imitate.

Margaret Froehlich '51

I have no doubt that but what time I spent in Sister Maura's classes inspired my passion for the written word.

Milda Motekidas De Voe '90

Long finger tapping a sheet of blank paper. She was able to wrap a fierce intelligence in a serene demeanor that challenged without threat, and encouraged without brute coaxing. As a student, I wrote a villanelle for her poetry class—an introduction to forms—and once it was finally good enough for Sister Maura, in a flare of collegiate passion, I sent it off to a national contest I found posted on the English Department's corkboard. It won a \$1000 first prize, and I found my ultimate calling. So thank you Sister Maura, for blessing us all with your quest for the perfect words.

Mev Miller '77

Sister Maura always seemed mysteriously ethereal to me when I saw her around the English Department hallways. I do remember though that, even in that one class, Sister Maura encouraged my uncanny ability to negotiate practicality and creativity for my writing projects. I was doing a Double Major while at CND -- in Music History and English Literature. Both departments required a final project. Of course, I would do anything to accomplish both obligations with a streamlined effort. So, I proposed to both departments that I write a research paper on the opera *Four Saints in Three Acts*—a libretto by Gertrude Stein for the musical composition by Virgil Thomson. Sister Maura seemed intrigued by this idea and helped me to clarify how I could do this effectively to meet the needs and standards for each department. This cross-disciplinary activity not only supported my learning but also provided me with the skills to produce two acceptable projects through one overarching and carefully designed research strategy. Both departments accepted my efforts. Needless to say, what I learned while pursuing that dual project—done with the guidance of Sister Maura's thoughtful critique—has served me well many times over since then.

Sister Robin Stratton '91

She was a presence, one sensed she walked with God; she moved in poetry. She was tall and stately, and carried herself as though she knew she was God's beloved. She wasn't distant, but she kept her counsel. She was even-tempered and soft-spoken. In a certain way, I'd say she was bigger than life, but that might give the wrong impression. She was absolutely real; she knew who she was as a Religious woman, yet nothing human was foreign to her.

She loved her students and made herself available to us. Because she was at the College for her entire Religious life, I suspect she set the standard for the English Department, if not for the College. She was an amazing teacher – she knew her craft, shared it generously, and when she thought something was very good, guided us in submitting it for publication. We knew she cared about us, not simply as students, but in our personal lives as well. She listened deeply.

She was shocked by *nothing*. In a fiction class in the 80's, she listened to a student's story punctuated throughout by the word sh-t. At the end, Sister Maura probed gently: "Do you think your character really said sh-t so frequently?" Without batting an eye, the student replied "Yes Sister, that's exactly what she said." Maura recounted the story with a wry smile.

She could be VERY funny – as when she told the tale of attending a Shakespeare play in London in her full old habit. The usher approached her and said: “Madam, I must ask you to remove your hat. It impedes the view of the person behind you.” Her reply: Sir, I can remove myself, but I cannot remove my hat.”

I had the joy of an independent study with her one semester. She pushed me – made me better than I thought could be. She challenged me to try new ideas, new forms. Her critiques were always constructive, her encouragement ever-present, her praise only when it was earned.

I’m sure Maura had her faults – but I don’t know what they were! I will forever be grateful that I had her as a teacher and mentor.

Mary Bonner ’84

Sister Maura did not encourage my “dream” of writing. She demonstrated discipline, focus and prayerful effort to choose meaningful subjects, forms, and inspirations. Her lessons were usually subtle, and always true. She wanted me to write (and read) with skill, and she also wanted me to be careful about what kept me busy, to rest, and to think about how my messages might impact others. Hours (or sometimes weeks and now, years) after a class, there might be a sudden revelation about a lesson—making it a lifelong joy to think back on my time in her presence.

Jo Trueschler ’49

We were all so lucky to learn from Sister Maura that "in writing nothing is too much trouble." Sister was a presence in the classroom and in our lives like no other.

Margaret Murphy ’55

An excerpt from my book, *How Catholic Women Have Changed*, speaks of Sister Maura’s importance in my life:

As the idea for this book began to form in my mind, I looked inevitably to the influences in my own life, and I found myself thinking more and more of Sister M. and the others whom I came to know when I returned to teach in the English department of my alma mater.... Sister M. did not inhabit the lay teachers’ lounge, but for me she was the strongest presence of all. Although she could not have been more than 40 years old at the time, Sister M. had already taught scores of young women to treasure fine literature and to write well themselves, and under her tutelage, dozens of them had walked off with literary prizes. Sister M. was slender, soft-voiced and quietly beautiful, so much so that one might have been tempted to think that she was also naïve and overly sweet. Not so. Sister M. was worldly in the best and most positive sense of the word. She had no illusions about the nature of the world outside of her college walls and she understood that human beings were lovable, but fallible. A poet herself, she had eaten *crepes Suzette* at Katherine Anne Porter’s and corresponded with Flannery O’Connor. In a letter dated October 31, 1963, O’Connor wrote a friend:

Every school I go to I end up with more friends among the Sisters—all highly individual too, they are. The one who runs the writing program at Notre Dame of Maryland is Sister Maura, a poet. As poets, when they are good, they are very very good and when they are horrid—she is good....

Sister M. was no one's idea of a stereotypical nun. She could skewer a pompous academic on a few lines of satirical verse or touch the moral core of a great work of literature. She was also the first woman religious who allowed me to see that she was a human being, when once, facing major surgery, she spoke honestly and unashamedly of her apprehensions. I have always valued that act of trust.

Dorothy Brown '54

Sister Maura's remarkable encouragement and confidence that we could write – even poetry – inspired and enabled us all.

Jane De Mouy '63

Sister Maura was charismatic, yet taught with great simplicity. I came to love her as my mentor, my colleague and my friend. She never said this to me, but I learned from her that true writing comes from the soul. These principles, which *are* her words, are imprinted in my brain forever:

- “The written word should be clean as a bone and strong as a stone; two words are not better than one.”
- “In writing, nothing is too much trouble.”
- “Hammer on doors with the heart.”

Susan Marshall '88

Sister Maura taught us the things of poetry, of course; forms, technique, to use as few words as possible and the importance of each word. We learned, one day, when we all brought in poems that lacked seriousness of intent in some way, that she expected our best. We also learned the inevitability of the need for revision and of the fact of rejection.

From Sister Maura I first learned to dare to take a chance with words, to put pieces of myself on paper, and that I could work to become a poet. Sister Maura told me, so long ago, that I would write when I was ready. I would dissolve the years between then and now so that I would be ready sooner and so that she might know I am working.

Karen Wheeler '78

Because I returned to school after many years away from an academic setting, writing papers and speaking out in class were terrifying prospects. There were times when I stood before a class to present a paper or a report, and Maura sat quietly at the back of the room with a calm and non-committal expression. If I faltered, her expression would change so minutely that it was barely discernible, but there it was, her lips barely turning up at the corners, those deep eyes intent, looking directly at me, she would nod, oh, so slightly, or perhaps slightly raise her chin... and that bare hint of amusement –the smile, the nod --, was a lightning bolt, speaking volumes in a glance; my confidence would surge, and I could forge ahead and inevitably, to my great surprise, I would do well. I know this story was repeated many times with her students.

Whenever I went to her with a piece of writing to vet, her criticisms and suggestions unfailingly were filled with the honor of her approach to me as to a contemporary, or a

colleague. She was not chummy, or my buddy. Our relationship didn't venture beyond that of student-teacher, but she never made me feel as though I was less than the professional she expected me to be one day, and I always left her feeling buoyed up. It was that tacit, confident, direct connection she had with her students as individuals that hit the mark every time. She imparted a sense of peaceful confidence. I am ever grateful to her and think of her always with great respect, gratitude, admiration and love.

Sister Kathleen Feeley '50

Whenever I start to write, I remember Sister Maura's mantra: Writing should be clean as a bone; strong as stone; two-words-are-not-better-than-one (chanted.)

When I was teaching writing, I remembered my response to her comment on my first Eng. 101 paper; it was filled with dashes. She did not circle all the dashes. She wrote: The dash is a distinctive punctuation mark, when used with discretion. I always tried to be as gentle and encouraging as she was.

Becky Lindberg '90

I began my first book while taking a writing tutorial with Sister Maura. She was a great source of encouragement and inspiration.

Erika Scheurer '86

On my office wall hangs a framed bookmark imprinted with Sister Maura's poem, "What My Teachers Taught Me I try to Teach My Students." When the work of writing and teaching seem overwhelming, reading this poem reminds me of what is essential: "A bird in the hand/is not to be desired." A copy also hangs outside my door so that waiting students may catch a glimpse of who I am through the words of my teacher. A number of these students will become English teachers themselves, and so the cycle continues—that sense of passing the essentials from one generation to the next.

While my writing these days is academic and not poetic (at all!), Sister Maura's influence remains. In her Shakespeare and poetry classes and in our memorable individual study on writing poetry, Sister Maura taught me the importance of paying close attention to language as a reader and as a writer. She taught me to respect the power of words, to slow down and take them seriously, to feel their heft in my soul.

I remember one day arriving to her office with some hasty, pathetic attempt at a poem, and Sister Maura kindly, but firmly suggesting that the trash can probably would be the best place for it. She knew I could do better. As I presented her with poem after poem, her generous, incisive comments on my writing pushed me, a needy first-generation college student, to rise to my potential.

The close attention to the art and craft of writing I learned from Sister Maura—her insistence on drilling down to the essentials--permeates not only my life as a writer, but also my life as a teacher of writing and as a teacher of teachers. Sister Maura taught me not only to know, but to *live* the phrase, "In writing, nothing/is too much trouble": a weighty gift I strive to live out and to pass to future generations of writers and teachers.

Diane Scharper '64 (Special to the *Baltimore Sun*, November 22, 2009)

By the time I entered the College of Notre Dame in the early 1960s, Sister Maura Eichner was already well known. Author of several books of poetry, she was friends with important literary figures like Flannery O'Connor, Karl Shapiro and Richard Wilbur - connections that were unusual for a woman teacher in the '60s - to say nothing of a nun garbed in a long black habit and veil.

I had applied to be an English major with a writing concentration. This required a portfolio and a meeting with the department chair, Sister Maura. I was sure Sister Maura would be impressed with my brown paper grocery bag filled with my poems. She barely glanced at my endeavors and instead began to recite the requirements for students who wanted to concentrate in writing. We had to take extra writing courses and write additional papers in all our other classes. We also had to write a senior thesis that would be a book-length collection of poems, plays, essays or stories. Could I do it?

Sister Maura considered writing to be work, and if nothing else, I was going to learn the value of that work during my numerous courses with her in our four years together. She said writing was 10 percent inspiration and 90 percent perspiration - although she didn't like the word "perspiration." She preferred "sweat," the Anglo-Saxon word, because she thought the Latinate word was pretentious.

An astute and picky critic, Sister Maura believed that good writing came from good reading, which for her meant the classics of Greek, Roman, British and American literature. We had to read and analyze the text to decipher what the writer meant - not what we wanted it to mean.

No matter that E.E. Cummings didn't punctuate his poems. We had to follow the rules before we could break them - if ever. No fancy British spellings. No exclamation points. Let the words show the excitement, she said. Choose strong verbs. Slash adverbs and adjectives.

We could use the thesaurus sparingly - to find the right word, not to show off our vocabulary. She disapproved of pretension and wordiness, telling us to follow the directions on the ladies room paper towel dispenser: "Why use two when one will do."

The lessons sound easy now. But I learned all of this the hard way after many arguments and numerous revisions of my poems, term papers, short stories, essays and plays - under Sister Maura's stern, ice-blue eyes.

In 1990, many years after I graduated, Sister Maura invited me and several former students to the WMAR television studio where she would read her poems. Tall, thin, with white hair, Sister Maura had an exquisite and melodic reading voice. She knew where to pause and what to emphasize. As I listened, I noticed new qualities in her work that had earlier escaped me. Certain metaphors made sense now; images resonated in a new way.

However, it was her poem, "What My Teachers Taught Me, I Try to Teach My Students," that stood out. As she read the familiar poem, which enumerates her rules for life and writing, I remembered our previous battles. Sister and I were now on the same side. I had been teaching her tenets of good writing. But it hadn't occurred to me until then that these weren't ideas that I discovered on my own. They - like so many other lessons - had come from Sister Maura herself.

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