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Sister Mary Reynette: One great teacher remembers another

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Every now and again I take the advice that I dole out to young teachers, and good things happen. This is the story of one such time.

One of my favorite exercises when I have to teach in "the death slot" on the afternoon before Thanksgiving is to provide a humongous basket of blank notecards and sheaves of postage stamps to the class and ask them to write a sincere note of thanks to someone who has sustained them on the occasionally tortuous path toward becoming a teacher. No tweeting, no emoticons, no crazy hip modern codes. Complete sentences, all true, in their own hand. We can talk about how completely anachronistic sending treemail is another time, but one of the things that has astonished me, even though it shouldn't, is how many of these cards wind up addressed to teachers. And how many of my students ask if they can please, please, please write more than one (eight is the current record). Heaping gratitude does everybody good. Writers of these cards glow afterwards — the silence as my students put pen to paper is simultaneously charged and gooey — and teachers who receive these cards treat them with something like reverence. But my point here is that when they're asked to consider who bears the most responsibility for seeing them through to teacherhood, the majority of my students' hearts leap directly to their own teachers.

I took a break from illustrating how to address an envelope in one of these sessions to think about my own teachers and how I channel the best of them every day. My students think I am teaching them *my* "Teacher Look," but really it is Mrs. MacDonald's perfectly arched right eyebrow that stops a room cold and gets them back to the business of learning. I've been known to use a high-powered Super-Soaker and packing peanuts to illustrate statistical validity and reliability, a can of cream cheese frosting to underscore the tenets of instructional planning; I'm one of those teachers who needs a cart to carry everything to class. That's because my own Mrs. Peterson needed one to teach a sophomore English class that I still think about every week, decades later. And I know to provide kleenex, candy, and a sympathetic mien as the young teacher in my office bawls in frustration at how her brilliant lessons are bombing and the students are being so very mean to her and why oh why did she ever think she could teach and is it too late to change her major, because the brilliant Dr. Weissinger showed me how that's done and would not let me cave

when multi-variate statistics threatened to derail me once upon a time.

Yes, I've had my fair share of clever, patient, adroit teachers and I pray each day to pay their holy work forward in my classroom. But who I took fountain pen to paper for, and determined to track down that day, was Sister Mary Reynette, my first grade teacher. She's the one who taught forty-eight of us (twice the recommended class size, by today's enlightened standards) how to make squiggles turn into letters and letters into words and words are what brought the universe into being, after all. The person who taught me how to read? Ah, there's a hero, someone who deserves a thank-you note. So, alongside my students, I wrote a heartfelt thank-you card to Sister Mary Reynette, in complete sentences, in my own hand.

But how to address it? She taught me back when the earth was cooling. She might have been among the hundreds of sisters who left her convent after new convictions and opportunities percolated in the roil of Vatican II. She might have stayed in religious life but changed her name, as did an old friend of mine, Sister Mary Mount Carmel, who reclaimed her less poetic but more accessible baptismal name, Sister Ann, when she traded her street-length black serge habit for jeans and a sweatshirt to carry on her order's ministry to the starving outcasts of South Central Los Angeles. If Sister Mary Reynette had left her order, she could be living anywhere; she might not only have resumed using her baptismal name; a lot of life could have happened in the last forty-five years. But I *had* to thank her for the life-changing gift of cracking the code of the printed word. I knew she'd been a Sister of Notre Dame, and I checked the website of my alma mater, St. Joan of Arc Parish School. Skunked: the sisters had withdrawn from there many years ago, as their own numbers shrank. I tried a naïve Google search; turns out there are nearly a hundred women's religious communities that have some version of Notre Dame in their name. I guess it's understandable that Our Lady is quite the inspiration for women seeking to commit their lives to the feeding and teaching and healing of others. Plumbing their websites, I found something beautiful and poignant: nearly all of them have links labeled something like "Find Your Favorite Sister." I should have known I am not the only person who has felt an inner exhortation years after leaving their tutelage to trace one of the quiet tenacious women who

Sister MARY

One great teacher
remembers another.

By Karen Eifler





formed me long before I knew that's what they were doing. But the orders, understandably, protect the privacy of their sisters past, present and former. Each order's website invited me to leave a message, the year and location of service and name by which I had known Sister; the liaison would search their archives and get back to me if there was a match. In the meantime, they would be praying for me and would share my anonymous gratitude with their sisters even if they were from a rival Notre Dame outfit.

After fifty-three rejections, I got an email with the curt Subject line "Karen!" My search had finally yielded the correct Notre Dame order, and Sister Mary Reynette, now Sister Florette Marie, was ecstatic to hear from a former student. Months after the search began, I had an address for the envelope, which was only slightly smudged after being carried around for so long. I sent the card. I visited her too, for it turns out that she lives about three hundred and twelve yards from one of my oldest friends. At that first visit, I signed in at the reception desk of her convent, and the sister on duty beckoned her by phone. I heard an exuberant "Kaaaaaaren" from some hidden room and this vision in pastel pantsuit and short-cropped salt and pepper hair burst through the double doors into the parlor. Now when last we had met, the day that Sister Mary Reynette and my mother had to unclench my fingers from my desk on the final day of first grade (I believe the principal was also called in for this operation — I *really* did not want school to end), I'd been about four foot nothing and Sister towered over me in full habit and black velvet wimple. I had no reason to believe this Sister Florette Marie was an imposter, but I asked her to frame just her face with her hands, so we could summon that old memory, and sure enough, those big blue eyes with their shy twinkle sealed the deal: I'd *found* her.

I'd already thanked her via my card, but she wanted to catch up on the last forty-some years. For me the big mystery, seeing this graceful woman just months away from celebrating her golden jubilee — fifty years as a School Sister of Notre Dame — was how old she had been way back then. She hadn't seemed old, it was more like she was ageless. Maybe that's one of the things the old black serge habits were supposed to do: render the sisters timeless, part of eternity. And I know that every adult appears ancient to first graders.

She had been twenty-one. She was

a dewy twenty-one years old when she corralled forty-eight of us and unveiled the world of words and taught us how to do school. She loved to sing and play the piano and thought little boys and girls who had a hard time sitting still in a crowded classroom might enjoy wiggling and chanting diphthongs and arithmetic families to tunes she thought up on the spot. Long before any of the official educational theories I now teach my own students were dreamt up and published in peer-reviewed journals, Sister Mary Reynette, nee Florette Marie, had this idea that music could be a great way to lead children to words, and she just did it. She still does it. After fifty years, it's no exaggeration to say she's led over a thousand children to words, lots of them children who these days would be termed "reluctant readers."



And I can't be the only teacher whose formal learning started with her. I've got a long way to go before I catch up, but I have to give her credit for any successes I have had in forming new teachers. As I was telling her this over our tea, two things stopped me in my tracks.

First jolt: when she was working those miracles with me and my cohort, *she was the same age* as the students who need my kleenex and candy and shoulder to cry on, which I am still gobsmacked to ponder. There has to be a lesson there for me to work with; maybe there were days when Sister needed kleenex and candy...what did she do then? I know how burnished, perhaps a bit romanticized my memories are, but it would never have occurred to my first-grade self that Sister would find any challenge insurmountable. Why would it, for Heaven's sake — she could see Michael taunting

Mary Helen even when her back was to the class as she wrote on the board. She could play four-square and double-dutch jump-rope in a floor-length black gown. She could answer every question in the *Baltimore Catechism* by heart. *She knew the capital of Nebraska*. She had a holy card for every student whose desk was clean on Friday afternoons. Together with the other sisters, she glided across busy Ocean Park Boulevard after early Mass each morning; it was a long time before I realized that nuns had actual feet, and I admit that in all reverence for their gracefulness and calm. But in our three-hour tea, I learned that she only appeared invincible. Daily Eucharist and a houseful of elders who had her back got her through days that were every bit as tough as those described by my young teachers. I savor that insight and pray that its wisdom can work its way into my own conversations with weary teachers as I wend my way to a golden jubilee of service.

Second jolt: in fifty years, said Sister Florette Marie, *I was the first former student who had contacted her to offer thanks*.

Well, that just made me weep. And ponder so many other teaching sisters with poetic names who wrested learning and imagination and manners and occasional reverence from rooms full of roistering souls: Sister Immaculata, Sister Mary Madonna Therese, Sister John of the Cross. Not only can we read and write and calculate standard deviations because of their heroic efforts, but thanks to them, I know what to say when I don't know what to say. They marinated me in the *Memorare* that appears on my lips without even thinking about it every time I hear an ambulance. I know the bumper sticker "If you can read this, thank a teacher," and I usually smile and wave to drivers of cars who bear it, or at least spare them my Teacher Look if they are taking too long to turn left. All good teachers deserve way more thanks than we will ever give them, more than we *could* ever give them. But I offer this as a heartfelt prayer of thanksgiving for the miracles of those good sisters who allowed their very names to be absorbed into something Really Truly Awesome. All true, mostly in complete sentences, in my own hand. □

University education professor Karen Eifler, the 2006 Oregon Professor of the Year according to the Carnegie Foundation, is the author of A Month of Mondays, a collection of her wry essays about teaching.