

Engaging Spirituality Bearings Letter

O that today you would listen to God's voice, harden not your heart. *Psalm 95: 8*

Sue Scharfenberger – Personal Introduction

My name is Sue and though I was born in Louisville, Kentucky, I have lived most of my life outside Louisville. Theology studies in Rome led to pastoral work in northern Mississippi and on to Peru, where I have spent the majority of my life. From very early in my life as an Ursulin Sister, I felt it my vocation to work for peace, very intentionally desiring to bring harmony into a world that seemed so very fragmented and divided. I have learned from the people in Mississippi, in the coastal town of Callao, in the mountains of Cajamarca and Muquiyaayo. Because of my Ursuline heritage, I have been a part of circles of women who have tried, in a variety of ways to be witnesses for peace and harmony. I am still learning.



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My Struggle

My dear friends,

Like most of my generation, that kind of roadmap was challenged, threatened, or in some cases, thrown to the winds in the sixties, seventies, and beyond. I don't know whether life became more complex or whether the changes that happened came at such a pace that I was simply forced to reshape my life plan.

What I know is that during that period there came a time of grace - those gifted moments where one begins to sense the divine without defining, apologizing or explaining. What I had studied about Scripture was no longer enough to sustain me through that time of questioning.

Thankfully, what I had learned about Scripture, about the Word living in a people, offered me the support to learn more, to listen through the eyes and ears of others, to realize that Christian faith has meaning only where a people come together to interpret and live their faith together.

I began to see my life then as a journey, not as a finished product. That alone was an opening for me to a new and different world. Answers became less important than questions. And questions became less important than insights, moments, and connections.

During this time I sought to know and understand the journeys of others in order to enlighten my own. I saw and understood myself in relationship. The way of relating, once very respectful of hierarchies began to look more like mutuality and inclusion.

I was discovering the face of God in the face of the poor, of my sisters, of my brothers.

I felt the excitement of learning who God is from the inside out, and sharing those discoveries with circles of women and men of other cultures, religious backgrounds, and faith experiences.

Certainly relationships themselves became all the more important to me in this journey, or rather in the intersection of my journey with others.



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My Practice

Like most of my generation who landed in Latin America, the church of the poor; the option for the simple and small; the kind of reflections that happen where small groups huddle around candlelight to read the gospel and understand its challenge—marked a spiritual path, yet unwritten in the works of the great fathers and mothers of our faith.

It was not easy then or now to distinguish anger toward an unjust system that created poverty, with an anger toward those responsible for that unjust system. It was not easy to balance a commitment to work to create systemic change, with the immediate needs that touched the lives of those who suffered from an unjust system.

My teachers however, were patient with me.

They were the women who participated in soup kitchens and the “glass of milk” programs that sprung up in our neighborhood. They were the youth who kept coming back because their search was not satisfied in the sports arena or in the political parties, which were the only options outside of school. And my teachers were the children who longed simply to play, to come together, to have a place off the streets.

Birthdays and anniversaries were celebrated.

I learned quickly that the poverty which surrounded us was not motive for pity or sadness. Perhaps it was precisely because there was little, that it was so easy to celebrate. No fancy trimmings, no expensive clothes, no banquets to be bothered with. Celebrations were easy to come by, and a week did not pass without our organizing one or being invited to one. It was being together in song and especially dance that motivated us and our celebrations. Sometimes it was even easier to celebrate than to organize a program, plan a fund raiser or study the most recent government or church decree. Certainly attendance was more significant. My teachers were in love with life, and defending life in all its forms became one of our permanent themes. We created songs, we made banners, and we marched in defense of human rights.

One very memorable moment was the visit of John Paul II to one of the shanty towns South of Lima. We, like many other Christian communities, went from our neighborhood in buses to spend the night on the sand dunes and wait for the Pope’s helicopter to arrive early the next morning. We shared our water supply and the blankets we had with us to keep us warm through the night. And of course we sang, and sang, and sang.



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And somewhere in the early morning the white and yellow flags were waved, announcing the arrival of the Pope. Two of the catechists from that area offered a greeting to the Pope that included the cry “our people are hungry, our people are hungry.” Somewhere after their message and during the liturgy, the Scripture story of the multiplication of the loaves of bread was read. During the reading someone next to me opened his backpack and shared with me a piece of bread. I did the same, and the one next to me likewise. Those of us who had spent the night on the sand dune, opened our backpacks and began sharing the bread we had brought. It was a spontaneous, totally unplanned gesture. It was the sacramental reflection of who we were becoming, not only in that single night on the sand dune, but in the work of becoming community.

We were among several groups there in that early morning, and most were from shanty towns similar to ours. And while I have no idea what the other groups did as they heard the message, I was very aware of being in communion with them, knowing like never before, what truly is the meaning of Eucharist. We had gone to meet someone who would bring us a message of hope, and we found hope in the communion we shared. We broke and shared the bread of our lives.



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My Challenge

Being hungry and being in communion might seem contradictory.

I believe, to the contrary that knowing and touching, breathing and singing the hungers of the world is what truly places us in communion with one another. Those are the places of deep relationship, transcending differences while embracing them and lifting them up.

All of us journey to find meaning in our lives, and to be about something that gives meaning to others.

For me the journey is this: building relationships, finding bonds that can be woven together, where the sacred is incarnated in the face of the other and where communion extends to the cosmic community of life.

It is a life journey.

It is a challenge.

It is an invitation.

This, dear friends, is what I have learned, and I bear witness to its truth.

Sue



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Engaging Spirituality is a program for small groups that invites participants to deepen their spiritual lives and their relationships with the poor and marginalized. To learn more about this program visit www.justfaith.org/programs/engagingspirituality/