

# Reflection on Sister Mary Joan Hopper

February 19, 1946 – May 19, 2023



Since her death, when I think of Sister Mary Joan—who is simply Mary or Aunt Mary to her family—I picture her encountering our God directly and her face lighting up with joy and awe. God’s immense creativity has always captured her heart and fueled her own artistic creations. I can only imagine what amazement and delight she experiences in God’s immediate presence, and God’s joy in greeting her who, having given expression to God’s boundless imagination, has come home to heaven.

Creativity has marked Joan’s life, at least in all the years I’ve known her. Whether in art or teaching, in learning that was mind-expanding, in connecting with others via an artistic endeavor or in assisting others to discover their own ability for self-expression, she was most alive when she was in creative mode.

As the eldest of the seven Hopper children, Mary likely got practice early in life, with her younger siblings. John and Anna Hopper brought into the world Mary, Joe, John, Jim, Annie, Martha and Cathy—a lively bunch then, I’ve gathered, and a close family to the present. That they are important to her—and she to them—is evident in story-telling, exchange of pictures (both photos and hand-drawn or painted art), in holidays celebrated together and treasured, and in her plans for gifts suited to each and every grandniece and nephew at a recent Christmas. At last night’s Vigil Service, stories abounded of Mary at their grandmother’s farm, and as her siblings’ second mother “who also sometimes conspired with us” and as the supplier of much-awaited gifts of art supplies to nieces and nephews and their children.

As did many Sisters of Charity, Joan began her ministry in elementary classrooms in the Pittsburgh and Greensburg Dioceses. Sent to teach in Glyndon, MD, she (an English major) found herself to be the upper elementary math teacher and she sought certification in that field. Back in PA, she had the opportunity to pursue an advanced degree in art education at IUP, and from that time art was her primary field. She taught the whole range of elementary students, K through 8. With each year’s curriculum building on the previous year’s, students advanced in skills, techniques, and work in a wide variety of media. I remember clear evidence of that in art exhibits at St. Therese School in Munhall; I was amazed at the range and skill displayed across the grade levels. In her years as a successful and recognized faculty member, Joan also taught language arts, religion, math and some science—she was an educator of many

talents. And a serious educator, always learning something new or more challenging to stretch the minds and hearts of her students and to help them to discover new frontiers. In newspaper articles and in the Golden Apple Award, her talent and effectiveness were noted. When Joan secured a diploma in digital design at the Art Institute of Pittsburgh, then she and her students expanded their abilities into the electronic arena.

Other venues opened for her, as well. As an artist, she experimented with and then mastered, in her own artistic creations, drawing, painting, fiber arts, weaving, photography, printmaking, digital design and calligraphy. Some of her many pieces are on display this weekend, but they only scratch the surface of her creative output.

With her artist/art teacher friend Monica Sinai, she taught adults in the McKeesport area at Penn View Art Center and elsewhere, igniting their own creativity and confidence. She joined with Sister Mary Denise Diethrich, Sister Mary Kay Neff and others to create Seton Arts Service Corps to make experiences in and learning about the arts available to children in underserved areas. This collaboration with Seton Hill University continues to the benefit of both the Seton Hill fine arts Scholars in art, music and drama, and the students who participate with gusto and impressive creations! Once she became a resident at Caritas Christi, Joan engaged other sisters in the house to paint and create other expressions of beauty; it gave to both Joan and the participants joy in discovery and accomplishment.

Yes, creativity is written all over her life and all through it. And her desire to awaken that creativity, appreciation and wonder in others means that myriad persons came to recognize and enjoy the Creator's life, energy and abundance.

She was alert to God-details in the world, in the cosmos. From the minute distinctions among seashells to the expanse of the universe, Joan was attentive to all the nuances. Last year we went to Half-Price Books and she made a beeline for the photography section, in search of NASA photos. This wasn't a new interest; she'd been directing students to wonder at (and learn about) the vast sweep of stellar bodies, planets, and stars for years. And it was one of her artistic works, a NASA photo of the Lena River Delta transferred to silk and stitched with colored threads and beads, that we four used for our Golden Jubilee invitations and worship aid covers eight years ago.

At our Half Price Books visit, we also sought out poetry that fed her soul, as did spirituality and art. Joan loved to read and learn, learn, learn, and to discuss what she was learning with others, in groups led by Sr. Gertrude and in community committees. She enjoyed studying Russian, both at Sacred Heart High and at Seton Hill College. She listened to Krista Tippet programs on public radio, relishing the broad and deep thought presented there, and sharing learnings with other individuals and groups.

I have been impressed, too, at the way Joan touched the hearts of staff members here at Caritas Christi despite the challenges and limitations she was experiencing. “She was beautiful inside and out,” one nursing staff woman said. Others commented on her smile, which lighted up her face and the room. Apryl McKinzie, the Activities Director here, assisted Joan to organize and lead art activities with other Sister residents. Photos posted on Facebook captured the joy of all involved in being creative and discovering what each person could produce.

Apryl’s response seems a fitting way to conclude this reflection. “She was such a PERFECT example of God’s love. She was full of life and art and the joy of teaching with such ease and encouragement! The galaxy now has the most perfect star in its heaven! I will always look up to dear Sister Joan!”

May we all—in memories and in real time in the Communion of Saints—remain connected with Mary/Aunt Mary/Sister Mary Joan, a reflection of God’s life and creativity.

--Sister Barbara Einloth  
May 22, 2023