

## REFLECTION ON THE LIFE OF SISTER MARY LOUISE LISOWSKI

July 28, 1946- December 7, 2020



*“Work like hell for the living.”*

Those of you who know Mary Lou will recognize this quote from the picture of Mother Jones that hung in her room in West Virginia, and at Caritas. Mother Jones is known as the Coal Miner’s Angel for her fiery rhetoric and fearless organizing of labor unions for West Virginia miners.

Mary Lou Lisowski, is known for her simple, sensitive speech and her amazing humility, simplicity and ability to organize sustainable services for the poor who belonged to her.

When I stopped to actually reflect on someone I took for granted, the DNA helix popped into my head. Our DNA gives each of us a unique identity. The image helps me to share with you not simply the chronology, degrees, jobs and awards in Mary Lou’s life, but the meaning of her life—who she really was.

For me, for my sisters Tubby and Phil, she was our sister, not through our DNA, but through her unique spiritual DNA.

Start with a question: What’s the difference between DNA and a birthday cake?

If the cake flops, some icing and decorations may save both the good taste and the good image. But, if the chromosomes in the DNA are not perfect in number and place, the organism lacks harmony, wholeness, integrity.

I think Mary Lou met her DNA match in the hollers of West Virginia where she went at Sister Baptista’s initiative.

I will share four strands of Mary Lou's spiritual DNA in her own words and from her own apostolate. Notice, I do not use the word "work," and I hope that you will see why as I share the meaning of Mary Lou's life.

THE FIRST STRAND—in her words

**“. . . the concept of charity is embedded in my life . . . it is my mission in life to make the Charity of Christ visible and real in the world . . .”**

Notice that Mary Lou defines the concept of charity differently than what is found in Webster or Social Work textbooks. She says the Charity of Christ—which is *Caritas*, is Service, and in the teaching of the encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*—"Service is love . . . freely given without proselytizing . . . it is an indispensable expression of the Church's very nature . . . A Eucharist which does not pass over into the concrete practice of love is intrinsically fragmented." Service—caritas is not merely a nice thing to do. It is an apostolate—acts of a disciple of Christ.

Mary Lou was not pious. She was an authentically spiritual woman whose spirituality infused, was not layered on as icing on her social work, her supervision, her executive and strategic planning—each performed according to the excellence of her profession.

She was a perpetual and sophisticated learner and thinker. She amassed undergraduate and graduate degrees in psychology, religion, education, and social work focusing on supervision and the economic and political aspects of social work. She took additional courses in the theology and psychology of pastoral counseling. Her experience as a religious minority in West Virginia led to her study of ecumenism, especially the varied forms of prayer. She almost completed an ecumenical program in New York, but was one class short. The certification of completion would have licensed her to perform marriages in New York! She laughed about this and never took the last class since she did not see herself in New York!

Her scholarship was for Service. Acting in the name of the visible Church, she owed those whom she served in its name, the best in exchange for, in her words, the values, virtues, and determination they taught her.

THE SECOND STRAND—in her words

**“My ultimate goal is to connect all of the people doing good so that by networking they can do more . . . I think it is about letting God be God and giving up my role as the center stage actress . . .”**

Do you see the simple unity of the secular and the sacred? Networks will sustain themselves and do more, if she lets God be God. The central actors are the persons she serves and they serve on their stage, which she built for them by pulling the string, off stage.

She founded a volunteer pastoral ministry in a small rural hospital. She, a minority Catholic, was twice elected as president of the ecumenical ministerial association.

With no entrance requirement, an eclectic group met in her apartment every Tuesday, with or without her, for prayer.

Her father was a member of St. Philip’s St. Vincent de Paul Society. They in Pittsburgh, and my brother in law Joe Barauskas in Greensburg, had trucks. Mary Lou saw a network. Before they knew it, they were on their way making regular trips with a truck load of supplies, driving winding roads without markers or guard rails to someplace in West Virginia called Tunnelton.

There are more examples, but time is not on my side. The enduring evidence of her strategic leadership is the Gabriel Project devoted to building healthy relationships and assisting mothers and babies who may be in crisis. Started with five women meeting in her apartment, the Gabriel Project serves all 55 counties of West Virginia and parts of Eastern Ohio.

Mary Lou smiled when she read that the Gabriel Project is strong after 10 years without her as the Center Stage Actress.

There is one more network important to the Sisters of Charity. Mary Lou’s parents, at first, were not supportive of her entering the Sisters of Charity instead of finishing her senior year at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. So, she enlisted a friend, Jay Bonstingl. On the day of her sister Loretta’s wedding, without her parents’ knowledge, Jay drove her to Doran Hall. She

was dressed in her bridesmaid dress, he in a formal suit. As they drove off from a gasoline station in a pink Cadillac decorated with tissue flowers and streamers with a sign saying “Just Married,” the gas station attendant wished them a happy honeymoon.

Every single one of the employees that she lead at Catholic Charities asked her not to resign from the Health Center. In a letter that each one signed they thanked her “for her positive changes . . . her approach to dealing with problems . . . for being fair and objective, upbeat attitude, accessibility, willingness to talk and listen to us, organizational abilities and genuine concern . . . is there any chance you will reconsider . . . and stay . . . we feel your competency will bring about needed change . . .

THE THIRD STRAND—in her own words.

**. . . Let faith replace fear . . . (I must) . . . Learn(ing) to live with my weaknesses . . . They are testimony for my need for God . . . Don’t become and obstacle on the way to God . . .**

There are those that may have thought that Mary Lou was in denial during the last months of her life when she was still researching what could be done for her disease and considering and reconsidering one more test. But that is simply not true. She would acknowledge how good the staff was to her, and she would ask me if she was a pain. I would say, well you do have a hard head. And never one to be negative, she would grin and respond it’s the determination I learned from my father.

But, the truth is, I respected her analytical method. She said that she needed a baseline for her decisions. She told me she knew her disease was going fast and that she was afraid. She prayed that fear into faith and acceptance.

Prayer, the kind that one reads about from the mystics, the Theresas, Hildegard, Merton, Teilhard . . . this faith sustaining fear, is the defining and integrating strand in Mary Lou’s DNA—not rote, ceremonial, or the discipline of regularized horarium, but the kind of unitive prayer that comes from grace sought after and attained deep in the silence on one’s aloneness. Vincentian spirit and prayer brought her to the Sister of Charity door. She spent a year in a house of prayer during which time she worked with abused

women. She made the 30-day Ignatian retreat. She chose our retreats—one at the Trappists. I convinced her by Wednesday, that we needed to go out for dinner.

I assumed that she would have picked the Beatitudes as the gospel for her Mass. When I reflected on her choice, the DNA helix flared up again in an “aha” moment.

She wanted to make the “Charity of Christ visible and real”. The Beatitudes without her choice of the preceding scripture passage may be simply nice things to do, the kind of charity we can do through the United Way or as described in Webster’s dictionary or even in her Social Work textbooks.

But, in order to be the Charity of Christ, the doer must first be the disciple. The reading she picked is first about being a disciple of Christ, who because of discipleship can make mere charity, the charity of Christ visible and real in the world. Mary Lou was first in every part of her being, a disciple.

#### The FOURTH STRAND

So, what’s the physical DNA—Mary Lou was the second daughter of Mary and Mike Lisowski, born seventeen months after Loretta. She and Loretta were, and remained close, first as playmates and then as adult women sharing hobbies, home and Caritas visits, and vacations. Nine years later Judy was born, and two years after Judy, Joni entered the picture. Though “little sisters,” Mary Lou enjoyed unique and loving relationships with each of them as adult women. Judy would supply Mary Lou with a variety of books which included rather sophisticated spiritual reading. She and Lee, her husband were part of the annual Chautauqua vacations. Joni, the youngest, is a nurse and was Mary Lou’s “go to” for medical information. She said Mary Lou kept them all together. With love and pride, Mary Lou told me of the important events in the lives of nieces and nephews: Loretta and Bill’s children, Jennifer, Allison and Bill; Judy’s daughter, Leslie; Joni’s sons, Stephen and Derek and, of course, the next generation, Dillon and Cody.

Her family stories started with her Polish grandparents who were coal miners! When I asked where she got her thing on cookies, she described her time baking with her mom who died in 1991. By her own admission, her hard

head came from her father who was in retail at Kaufman's in Pittsburgh. He died in 2005.

Mary Lou was born in 1946 before we spoke of DNA. In 1946, Sister Electa Boyle, in Mother Seton's Sisters of Charity in Western Pennsylvania, wrote:

"The religious ideal is never sacrificed to the professional . . . The ideal Sister of Charity is the good religious who is also a successful professional"

Mary Lou, to say that you were an ideal Sister of Charity is not the hyperbole of grief. It is a simple fact.

Unit the end you "worked like hell for the living," not with fiery rhetoric, but with the fire of Christ's love.

We pray now, not for the dead, but with you in the communion of saints.

The dedication on Sister Electa's book reads in part:

*To the Memory of . . .  
The Seton Hill Sisters of Charity  
Who Now Sleep In Peace . . .  
Especially One.*

I now know who she is.

Thank you.

*Funeral Liturgy Reflection*

*Sister Melanie Di Pietro*

*December 11, 2020*