

Remembering Sister Maura

I lost a dear friend last month. Sister Maura Eichner had been one of my English teachers at the College of Notre Dame of Maryland, but over the years she became much more.

I met Sister Maura in the spring of 1976 when I took her Five Modern Dramatists course. We both loved theater, and so our first bond was established.

After graduating, I continued to visit. She always seemed glad to see me, coming from behind her desk to sit in a chair opposite me to talk friend-to-friend.

When a lack of physical stamina made it necessary for her to retire, our visits became even more intimate as we sat in the cozy living room of the suite she shared with other sisters. I cherished those times most of all. That big room with its unpretentious furniture was so comfortable and inviting, and Sister Maura was like a mother welcoming me home. A severe childhood trauma had left my own mother incapable of loving and caring for me the way a child needs, so all my life I've looked for mothers. I found one in Sister Maura. I would give anything to sit with her again in that living room.

I'm blessed Sister Maura and I shared a special bond. She grew up at 528 E. 84th Street in New York, in one of those railroad flat buildings. A few are still on the block. Hers, though, was incorporated many years ago into what is now my building, so I live on the very spot where Sister Maura grew up. I hadn't known this until I told her my new address. She was thrilled and told me to look hard for traces of chalk on the sidewalk from her hopscotch games and to listen for the sound of her jump rope hitting the pavement.

Sister Maura and I didn't just share the neighborhood where we lived, though. Before my first book sold, I took a job as a secretary on Fifth Avenue at 56th Street. When I told Sister Maura, she smiled and said her first job had been as a secretary on Fifth Avenue at 57th Street, for a philanthropic organization that helped poor pregnant women learn to care for themselves and also trained midwives.

"I learned more there about pregnancy and childbirth than I could have anywhere

else,” she told me.

Sister Maura cared for her boss, Hattie Hempsmeyer, and the other women, but after a year she told them she was leaving to become a nun. They tried to talk her out of it, saying she would be wasting her life. She left, but was unable to let them know how happy she was. In those days, nuns could only correspond with immediate family at Christmas and Easter. What a shame it was those well-meaning women couldn’t know her as I knew her, so alive with her love for God, her fellow sisters, her students, literature and life at the College.

I also wish those women could have known that Sister Maura didn’t just “waste” her life as a School Sister of Notre Dame, she also had a professional life as a distinguished writer. She had more than 350 of her poems published.

And she helped others to become writers. Like Hattie, she became a midwife of sorts in her 50 years of teaching literature and creative writing at Notre Dame. In the 21 years of Atlantic’s student-writing contests, Sister Maura’s students won 297 awards, including nine first-place honors. I followed a different genre, but won reporting awards.

I still have many of the letters Sister Maura wrote to me over the years. I’m sad there will be no more, but happy to think, at 94, she has finally met the mother who died before her first birthday. I will just miss her so much as mine.

Retta Blaney, who blogs about faith and the performing arts at <https://uponthesacredstage.blogspot.com/>, is the author of “Working on the Inside: The Spiritual Life Through the Eyes of Actors.”