

Sue Schmitt Memorial

- October 8, 2012
- Stephen V. Sundborg, S.J.

It is very hard for me to believe that Sue has died. When I walk by the little, impromptu shrine at Loyola and see her photo, I expect her to tease me. When I see the photo of her in her wheelchair reading to children, I can hear her voice. When I see her photo in the obituaries in the Seattle Times, I catch myself asking what is it doing there.

Sue is one of those very few people who we will expect to see for a very long time at her van on the upper mall, or on the stage at commencement, or offering a comment in a Deans Council meeting, or delighting at a Martinez Foundation banquet, or bragging about Carlito, or rolling in a procession into a church. Some seem to continue to inhabit our campus to greet us: a Fr. Bill LeRoux, an Anne Carraghan, an Al Mann, a Sue Schmitt. I'll never pass Loyola early or late and not expect to find her and to allow her to lobby me for something!

Now why is this that many—even our most beloved—we remember, but others we continue to expect to be there, not disappearing, unquenchable? I believe it is because Sue Schmitt—like only a few others—had a very unique spirit, a spark and life which was gathered and concentrated by overcoming disability so that it flamed up, a concentrated courage and compassion, a childlike playfulness and delight in others, and a generous giving of gifts which is more than a memory, that is so unique a spirit of life that it lives on and will continue to be among us. Today we remember her and those who knew her best will tell her story. But I believe that long beyond this day she will continue to tell her own story, to share her own life with us, to encourage us—whatever our disabilities—to live our own lives fully, freely, courageously, compassionately, lovingly, lastingly, in a good way and in God.

God's word to us today is a word of revelation about Sue and as an ongoing lesson to us from Sue the continuous teacher. Paul the Apostle says about himself but could it not also be said about Sue:

“I am already being poured out like a libation,
and the time of my departure has come.
I have fought the good fight,
I have finished the race,
I have kept the faith.”

Move over St. Paul, for that's Sue! Poured out in service, one who outdid anyone in fighting her good fight against all obstacles, finishing and winning the race rolling right on by the rest of us, keeping the faith of her family and her church, so that at any time, even at a most unexpected time, she was not caught unprepared or half-way toward her life's goals when the time of her departure came.

I love the next bit from St. Paul too as quite appropriate to Sue. It's about when God establishes his kingdom:

“From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for God's appearing.”

Sue is asleep in Christ; she will be awakened in the Kingdom of God, and we with her. I can only imagine her still rolling around, not in a wheelchair, but in a chariot, and waving as she wears that crown. I think she will like that bit very much, and it will be a very well deserved crown of justice, goodness, and faith.

Someone the other day told me that everything we say about what happens after death is poetry, not prose. As poetry it evokes what might be, alludes to it, gives an image, stirs a feeling, rather than delivers it in prosaic fact. Here's a poem by Anne Porter which is perfect for Sue and for us about what might be beyond death.

A NIGHT IN IRELAND

Our steamship docked at night
In Cobh, an Irish seaport
A small one in those days

Not an inn, not a tavern was open
And we had to wait till morning
For the train to Fermoy

But in the wooded hills
Up above the town
Nightingales were awake
All the dark thickets
Were rich with their songs

It was on that night
And in those woods
I dreamed that I found the door
Of all doors the most hidden
And most renowned

Overgrown with nettles
Rustic and low
Built as if for children
Or as a gate for sheep
In some back-country pasture

And through a chink in the door
 I saw the marvelous light
 That's purest of all lights
 Neither sun nor moon
 Nor any star I know of
 Could give such light

And I saw the crowds of the blessed
 From the greatest to the smallest
 The smallest were running and laughing
 And Christ the Lord was with them
 And also Mary

But before I could knock at the door
 Someone spoke to me
 I think it was an angel

He said You've come too soon
 Go back into the towns
 Live there as love's apprentice
 And God will give you his kingdom

I woke up just before sunrise
 When the nightingales ended their songs
 Dew gathered on the ferns
 And the cool woods
 Gave off a scent of earth
 In the early morning

I was hungry and cold
 And I started back to the town
 At the first signs of day

Already a sunlit smoke
 Was rising from the chimneys
 And mist from the water

I heard a rooster crowing
 And then I heard the whistle
 Of the train to Fermoy.

The low door built as if for children, the marvelous light, purest of all lights, the crowds of the blessed the smallest running and laughing, with Christ, with Mary. Poetry about what's beyond the door. The school bell has rung and Sue has been told to come in through the door. The train whistle sounds for us and we are told, "Go back into the towns, live there as love's apprentice,

and God will give you his kingdom.” “Love’s apprentice”, isn’t that what Sue’s life was all about and what ours is invited and inspired to be by her?

To the end and in all circumstances and occasions Sue was above all the teacher. Loyola Hall and our whole campus, and our city and community and country were all classrooms for Sue the teacher. How right then that the Gospel, the Good News, chosen for this Memorial Mass is of Jesus sitting down, teaching his disciples. And what an unusual lesson plan he follows:

Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn,
for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek,
for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst
for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful,
for they will receive mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart,
for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called children of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

These lessons turn upside down all we think makes for blessedness: poor in spirit, mourning, meek, merciful, pure in heart, peacemaking, persecuted for justice. Yet, such we are told are the ones who are comforted, filled, inheritors of the earth, recipients of mercy, children of God, citizens of the Kingdom of God. Once again, it’s the prose of our lives as love’s apprentices, and the poetry of God’s blessing. Each lesson speaks so clearly of Sue and her spirit, commitments, and life. They are the lesson plan from which she unceasingly taught. They teach us about our own call and the promise beyond the door.

As I conclude the remarks I am privileged to make as priest and president in Sue Schmitt’s Memorial Service, and as we turn to the memories of others, allow me to paraphrase the teaching of Jesus addressed now more personally to Sue the teacher.

Blessed are you, Sue, for your sparkling spirit,
for you enliven others.

Blessed are you for all you suffered so acceptingly,
for you show us to make light of our woes.

Blessed are you for being both courageous and meek,
for you have won the rights of many.

Blessed are you who strove for justice,
for thousands live fuller humane lives because of you.

Blessed are you for your mercy and
compassion for the young and the blind, and the disabled,
for they know God's compassion.

Blessed are you in your purity of heart (with just a touch of the devil in you),
for we have been purified by you to see God better in our lives.

Blessed are you as peacemaker in the College (no easy task!),
in schools and community,
for you are indeed a peaceful child of God.

And blessed are you for all you have stood up for and stood against for the sake of others,
for they and you shall ride in chariots and wear crowns in the Kingdom of God.

Sue, I still can't believe you have died, but now I know that I will never really need to believe it.