

GOD WRITES STRAIGHT WITH CROOKED LINES

**The life and legacy of Janet Erskine Stuart, RSCJ
Villa Duchesne, February 2, 2007**

Once upon a time...I was a junior at Duchesne College, Omaha, and I was struggling with many things – family financial crises, family alcoholism, my future, marriage vs religious life, and Sister Flavia Augustine, Dean of Students at the time, said, “Be patient, Shirley, often God writes straight with crooked lines.”

I have returned to that message over and over again in my life. God will lead us to where we need to be, but the road may not be a direct one, the path may not be a straight one, the way may not be the one we think we want. As Isaiah says, “My ways are not your ways, nor my thoughts your thoughts,” says the Lord our God.

When I think of Mother Stuart, I believe that this was her experience, too. The lines God wrote in her life were not always straight.

So, this is my interpretation of Janet Erskine Stuart, drawn from many resources and woven into my life experience.

Janet Stuart was raised by older siblings and governesses. She roamed the hills and was haunted by loneliness, shyness, separateness. She was born Anglican and yet she was led to the Catholic Church. Her father was an Anglican rector, and she became a Catholic sister. In the Society of the Sacred Heart her loneliness was turned to solitude, and her shyness was transformed into leadership.

There are three parts to this presentation about Mother Stuart:

Her life and her search for God

Recurring themes in her writings:

Love as the beginning and end of everything

“Let us love loyally, faithfully as the Lord has loved us.”

Being oneself: “Copies are always deplorable.”

Finding God in all things: “Events are the sacraments of God.”

And ending with some of her educational methods and writings

Janet Stuart was born on November 11, 1857. She would be 150 years old. Her father was rector of a lower church Anglican parish in Cottesmore, England. He had 7

children with his first wife. She died in 1845, and in 1849 he married Mary Penelope Noel. By this marriage there were 6 children of whom Janet was the youngest.

Janet spent her childhood roaming the woods, riding horses, helping her father prepare his sermons, studying scripture in the rectory with her father. He allowed her the freedom to roam where she wanted, and thus, began her enchantment with the world of nature. Such a contrast – 12 siblings and yet so much loneliness in her life.

When Janet was 14, a highly educated German Protestant governess came to care for the children, and she brought with her many books on theology which she discussed with Janet. At the same time Janet connected with a part of her mother's family who had converted to Roman Catholicism. She was deeply influenced by them, and much against her father's wishes, she converted to Roman Catholicism when she was 22.

Through a Jesuit priest, Father Gallway, she came to know the Children of Mary Sodality, and through the Sodality, the Society of the Sacred Heart. At the age of 25 she entered the Society where she remained until her death at age 57. She had great natural abilities as a teacher, as an administrator, as a formation director. She was Mother General of the Society from 1911 until her death in 1914. Because of her many gifts, she spent most of her religious life in leadership roles.

Her search for God began early. When she was a small child, her brother turned to her and said, "Aristotle said we must have a last end...what is your last end, Janet?" She could not answer that question but the question haunted her, and she began an eager search for the answer. When she was six years old, she heard the story of Lazarus being raised from the dead, and with all the faith in the world, she went to the cemetery where her mother was buried, stood before her grave, and said, "Mama, come forth!" And when her mother did not come forth, Janet was devastated, and this began a period of agnosticism in her life. Only when she came in contact with her Catholic relatives and the 'penny catechism' did she discover the answer to her brother's question, 'God made me to know him and love him and serve him in this world and to be happy with him in the next.' And an amazing peace overtook her.

Perhaps this period in her life is best described in her *Essay on Color*, as she describes the ages of 14-21:

"This is the wonderland of life, the age of our mysticism, the years of ideas. We are then the discoverers of our own lives. Our world is new every day. Either we are sailing toward new shores, daring mariners in search of the unknown and day by day the horizon dips lower and our stars rise higher, or we are explorers by land, and new wonders reveal themselves on each day's march. Some of us go by sea and others by land all through their lives. We do not love the glories of those years less, now that we can look back and see that some of them were clouds and some were mirages in the desert. They did their work and they were the band of yellow, clear gold in our lives. We would

not have been without a day of them. In these years, each morning brought its message, “Onward!” and each evening asked “Whither?” and the morning answered “Onward” again.

Do you go best by land or by sea? Her images and metaphors are so rich. More than any other writer or poet, I believe she has had the greatest influence on my spiritual life.

As Janet was discerning a call to religious life within the Society, she was going to the chapel for exposition of the Blessed Sacrament. As she was walking through the park, she saw a bed of blue hyacinths. As she looked at them, she said, “The word of God came to me.” And she realized that God was calling her to religious life. Not quite believing this, she asked for a sign by which she might know this was a true call. She asked that in the chapel of the convent, contrary to all likelihood, she would be allowed to kneel on one of the prie dieu placed before the altar, where only the religious knelt. She entered the chapel and had scarcely taken her place in a pew when one of the religious asked her to replace her because she felt too ill to continue to remain there. She knew at that moment that her future had been opened out before her.

Her life was often like that – God speaking to her through the beauty of nature or through unexpected experiences, generally, in very simple moments and events. Our reality is the text through which God speaks to us.

She wrote once, “Events are the sacraments of the will of God.” And for her, events were those sacraments all of her life.

I made my annual retreat at the end of November for ten days at the Gulf Shore this year, in a tiny little place right on the beach. The first evening I was walking the beach at sunset and was totally absorbed in the beauty of the moment – the colors of the sky, the sun casting a swath of light on the water, the clouds turning purple and gold and crimson. I was walking back to where I was staying, and thought that I was the only one on the beach. I was gathering shell fragments and putting them in a plastic bag. I looked up and there was a man dressed in all black, a Johnny Cash looking guy, worn face and shining eyes. He asked me if I was finding beautiful shells, and I told him my bag was filled with beautiful fragments. At that moment, he held out both of his hands, filled with perfect shells, and said, “Take whatever you want; these are all gifts from God, and they are meant to be given away.” I took a few of his perfect shells and added them to my bag of fragments, thanked him profusely and walked on down the beach, looking back occasionally to make certain that I was not having an apparition!! He was still there. Each night at sunset, I looked for him, but he never returned.

I have thought so often about that encounter, so unexpected, so precious...I had gone out to watch the sunset, to praise God, and I met a stranger who offered all he had to

me, and reminded me of a very fundamental message from Jesus: “What you have received as a gift, give as a gift.” Events are the sacraments of God.

Recurring themes: LOVE

Janet chose as a priority to understand and love each religious and each child under her care – providing the kind of work and projects that would bring out the best in each one. She believed in each one’s potential and brought out things in them that others would not have believed possible.

“The only way to govern is to love...this is a woman’s order and must be governed in a woman’s way – by the heart, not by logic. The heart is the mainspring of a woman’s government. Therefore, anything that takes us nearer to the heart of people is our great power. Unselfishness and love are our levers.”

“Religious ought to be led by charity rather than severity. Our Lord’s way of leading was solely based on love and charity.” So like Madeleine Sophie’s words, “Let love be your life for all eternity” or “Listen to them with interest, to console and to encourage them...and become for their sakes gentle, patient, indulgent, in one word, a mother”

“We do not realize that we need never fear to love too much, but rather not to love enough... Therefore, that we may enter more fully into the spirit of our vocation, let us love more and more. Let us love frankly, loyally, generously as our Lord has loved us.”

Devotion to the Sacred Heart meant for her a loving regard for each person she encountered, a belief in their ultimate destiny, in God’s careful regard for each person – on the mercy of God, never on the judgment of God, an open, overflowing heart. It is all flowing out of the Heart of God, like water from a river, like rays from the sun.

It was said of her, “Her strength was in her love.”

If you want to know this kind of love, you must accept God’s unconditional love for you – for you as you are, no copies of someone else.

Be yourself

She chose as her model in the noviceship, St. John Berchman’s but learned early on that modeling herself after anyone was a serious mistake, and she would say later when she was Mistress of Novices, when a novice chose St. John Berchman’s as her model, “Drop John Berchmans, Sister – be yourself.”

When I was young I imitated my older sister Mary Dell for a long time, and I was miserable because I could never be as tall or as slim or as beautiful as she was! Finally, at Duchesne College I learned to drop the imitation, “Drop Mary Dell, Shirley, and be

yourself.” Mom and Dad told me that they already had a Mary Dell, and one was enough. What they needed was Shirley! And gradually, I experienced a great sense of freedom.

Mother Stuart once said, “You are God’s property, and your life must be one wild bird’s song of praise, one wild flower’s face looking up to God. Do not try to be a garden flower.” She loved wild flowers and got to know them intimately during her years of wandering through the meadows and fields. I think she considered herself a wild flower – perhaps a sunflower.

She believed that to accomplish one’s mission and to do one’s work, it was essential to be oneself. “We must never try to be copies of the other. However excellent the model, copies are always deplorable. God never meant for us to be copies. If we imitate too closely the actions of another, we are not truly ourselves, and we cannot give the true, the real note that we should give when speaking with our own voice.”

She believed that every person, each child has a specific mission in life.

“We must remember that each one of our children is destined for a mission in life. Neither we nor they can know what it is, but we must know and make them believe that each one has a mission in life and that she is bound to find out what it is, that there is some special work for God which will remain undone unless she does it, some place in life which no one else can fill... We must bring home to our children and to ourselves also, the responsibilities for our gifts.

I remember reading this over and over again as a young religious – that I had a special mission in life that would not be accomplished if I did not do it. It was a profound call for me, and reminded me of words that my dad has said to me on a summer night in Nebraska as we stood, his arm around my shoulders, looking up at the stars, “Shirley,” he said, “the world would have been incomplete if you had not been born.” And I believed him! (I wonder if he ever said the same thing to Mary Dell!!)

Mother Stuart often said that to every Christian called has been given some portion of the life and character of Jesus so that they might show it forth in their own lives and be a continual representation of his life on earth. To some it has been given to show forth his passion, in others the poverty of Christ is resplendent. In Mother Stuart, we see her showing forth the love of the Heart of Christ.

There is a story that I have heard repeated often – a young man had a dream that he died and went to stand before the judgment seat of God. As he waits for God to speak to him, he is terrified that the Lord will ask him, “Why weren’t you Moses or David or Solomon?” But God surprises him and asks him simply, “Joseph, why were you not yourself?”

The most gracious gift we can offer the world is our own authenticity, our own uniqueness.

Finding God in all things

From her earliest years, Janet found God in nature, in the woods she roamed, the fields where she rode horseback, in the wildflowers and bird song. Nature was her door into reality, and she entered it again and again and again, and she found God and beauty everywhere.

She quoted often the words from Hosea, “I will draw her into the wilderness and there I will speak to her heart.” She spent her life going into the wilderness to meet her God and to regain the joy and strength she needed for her work.

She experienced times of depression and of deep melancholy, but these times led her more deeply into the Heart of God. Many years ago when I visited Roehampton in London where she is buried, I received a holy card with a message from her, “A bird does not sing because it has answers, it sings because it has a song.” And I thought of what her life must have been like – a contemplative by nature being thrust into leadership in the Society all of her life, and her song being tempered and strengthened by her daily life.

Those words have sung inside me all of these years, reminding me that I didn’t have to have all the answers, I only had to sing my song, a song that was uniquely mine – a song of praise and gratitude.

“She watched the play of light and shade and colour in the woods, and it gave her the sense of the unseen pressing on her. She heard the undertones of nature, and had strange fears of the unknown and unseen, but yet was drawn to all that was invisible, longing to find the mystery at the heart of all things. Sights and sounds, seemed to her to be full of symbols. She loved unknown and unexpected paths. Byways - -where the mysteries call us onward, and the shy nightingales sing, and the stress of life is lifted, and the ticking of time is still...where life seems larger, because of silence and calm, where the soul may be invaded and taken captive, unresisting by the powers of the world to come.”

What she saw in her solitude colored her relationships with others.

“The color of our thoughts dyes our soul; the color of our soul dyes our world.” She dyed her world with beauty and kindness, with symbol and poetry.

She helped me learn to be attentive in nature. I read her LIFE AND LETTERS during college and was drawn to her work and felt an immediate kinship with her, because I, too, had roamed the hills when I was young and discovered God in bird song and tree houses, in running streams and changing leaves.

“Remember that whatever happens, you must say to yourself, according to circumstances, joyfully, thankfully, humbly or submissively or bravely or if need be, defiantly to the trouble within, “This is part of the story, and the story is God’s love for you and your love for God.”

I have taken great comfort in those words over the years – each event, each joy, each sorrow, each relationship, each experience is part of the story of God’s love for me, and my love for God.

Her thoughts on education

Janet Erskine Stuart is one of the Society’s greatest educators.

I want to tell you a story told to me by a friend, Vince Hovley, a St. Louis born Jesuit who works at Sacred Heart Retreat House in Sedalia, Colorado, where I have made my annual retreat most years. He has been my spiritual director and has become a good friend. He was in St. Louis recently, and we met for lunch. He had come from praying in the St. Louis Cathedral Basilica on Lindell. He had gone into the Cathedral to experience again the 40 million pieces of mosaic in that extraordinary structure. He was kneeling toward the front, lost in wonder at the beauty, and he noticed an elderly black woman a few pews up, kneeling in prayer. He found himself caught up in the beauty of the person, and he had a profound insight into the dignity of the human person as he looked at her. And he said, “What are 40 million pieces of mosaic compared to trillions of cells enfolded in the human being – a living being who can laugh and sing, pray and kneel, hug and wave and weep. He realized he knew he would never look at a human again in the same way.

Each person is a cathedral, a temple.

I think Janet Stuart must have had a similar intuition into the sacredness of the human person, and that affected the way she educated, the way she wrote, the way she lived, the way she prayed.

“The final cause of education: to raise children to a clear knowledge of their last end, and to give them the means to attain it.

How this harkens back to her brother’s question to her when she was a small child – what is your last end, Janet?

“Train their hearts to a love of religion and all of the virtues which it inspires. If we do other than this, we are simply giving instruction. Our aim is to turn the hearts of children to God.”

“There are two ways of educating: one, to give heart, mind, energy, everything to working for the children – doing things for them. The other, to try to teach the children to work for themselves. And this is the higher of the two.

“A diploma is not an end, but a beginning,” she once said – it is a life long process.

“She knew that each child is unique and that there can be no real educative influence unless it happens person to person. Each child is not merely one of a group. She has personal interests, tastes, reactions hopes, fears, a background built up of varied experiences. Not only do children differ from each other, but the same child differs from one day to another. A good teacher should be able to read even their thoughts and see their disposition in their faces...and ask of a shy or withdrawn child, “Is it my fault. Is it fear which prevents her from coming out of her shell? Is there not a spring that I can touch within her.”

“We are to teach by example rather than precept” “Let us leave actions behind, not just words.” (MSB)

“Success to be worthy of the name must mean an end proposed and attained...We bring up the children for the future, not for the present, not that we may enjoy the fruit of our work, but for others, for God, for the Church, for their families, for their home life. Therefore, we must have to do with things raw and unfinished and unpolished. The children will come to us untaught and leave us half taught. We sketch a plan but never see the crowning of the edifice. So we must remember that it is better to begin a great work than to finish a small one...the work in the rough may look ugly and yet be full of promise...a piece of finished insignificance is no true success...our education is not meant to turn the children out small and finished but seriously begun on a wide basis. Therefore they must leave us with some self knowledge, some energy, some purpose – if they leave us without these three things, they drift with the steam of life.”

Mother Stuart knew that we cannot give or share what we do not have.

“Those who educate must themselves be striving for some higher excellence, and must believe and care deeply for the things they teach. For no one can be educated by maxim and precept; it is the life lived and the things loved and the ideals believed in by which we tell what is important.”

In 1913 Mother Stuart began her trip around the world, during which time she visited the United States. During her famous voyage she wrote her “little book from the sea,” *The Society of the Sacred Heart*, her last gift to the Society of the Sacred Heart. The first copies were printed the day after her death. She was exhausted, the war had begun, religious were exiled, and she was cut off from religious throughout the world.

Mother Stuart had returned filled with dreams and hopes for her religious throughout the world and for the mission of the Society. But God had something else in mind for her.

She had given her all as she visited the Society throughout the world, and her dreams and plans were handed over to her God to complete them, in God's way not hers.

Upon returning from her trip, she became ill. Following an operation, blood poisoning went through her entire body, and there was no hope for recovery. She died on October 21, 1914 at the age of 57, having been Superior General for the last three years. She was buried at Roehampton in the chapel she loved so much.

There is a wonderful account of her funeral in *LIFE AND LETTERS OF JANET ERSKINE STUART*, "While the coffin waited covered with flowers, a robin was its constant companion. He took up his abode in the chapel and sang his most beautiful songs, sometimes perched over the tabernacle, sometimes inspecting the newly-made vault, sometimes feeding among the flowers. He joined his voice with the Office of the nuns, and it was heard through the rolling of the organ. Nothing daunted him, neither numbers of people, nor noise, nor lights, nor incense, and it seemed to his hearers that God had sent him, 'missing on earth the song of hope' which had never failed to rise to God from the heart of Mother Stuart."

"Thus, the poem of her life was finished, its last line written; the first among the woods and flower-strewn fields of childhood, the last on the threshold of a fairer life, and between lay an ocean of understanding and love."

Mother Stuart's life is summed up for me in her words, *Spirit Seeking Light and Beauty* from her play, *The Ugly Duckling*:

Spirit seeking light and beauty, heart that longest for my rest,
Soul that asketh understanding, only thus can ye be blessed.
Through the vastness of creation, though your restless heart may roam,
God is all that you can long for. God is all his creatures' home.

Take and see him, feel and hear him, hold and grasp his unseen hand,
Though the darkness seems to hide him, faith and love can understand.
God who lovest all thy creatures, all our hearts are known to thee,
Lead us through this land of shadow, to your blest eternity.

SOURCES

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