

Judy Harding

- Funeral Mass
- March 9, 2019
- Stephen V. Sundborg, S.J.

Three and a half months ago we gathered here in St. Therese, the parish church of John and Judy Harding, for the funeral of John. Today we gather again, now for the celebration and the remembrance of the life of Judy. This marks the closing of a generation of this family of strong traditions and the inspiration of new generations of the family. We did not know how much longer Judy would live after the death of John. As it turned out, and as some family predicted, not very long. It is right that we celebrate them so closely together—for they were the closest of couples in love, in faith, in joy in one another, and in pride in their family especially when they were able to gather together with family in Maine. We believe that as they were united in the sacrament of marriage they are now united in God’s mercy and joy. Though one in marriage, John and Judy each had her or his own unique life, faith, and love.

I am probably not the one who should speak of Judy’s spirituality. Over the course of a dozen years she shared here spirituality with me and with other friends. It was a spirituality of joy, of exclamation, of exuberance, like the joy of Hannah in our first reading and the joyful praise of God of Mary in the Gospel. Judy and I used to argue about whether or not you could actually experience God. She would have none of my Jesuit, intellectualized reluctance on that subject. Her heart lifted up to God in joy, in nature, in children, in family, in garden and birds, in Maine, in John, in the poor, in this community and school of St. Therese, in kindness, in the goodness of people. Maybe I am not able to actually experience God, but Judy was. Her soul magnified God as did Mary, and her heart exulted in God as did Hannah, as God “raises the needy from the dust and from the dust and from the ash heap lifts up the poor”.

Even in these last two years when we, their Seattle University Jesuit priest friends, came to celebrate Mass for them each Sunday in their home, Judy’s eyes were bright with joy, with love, with gratitude, with the experience of God. I don’t think I knew any person with as bright eyes as Judy. She saw things most of us do not see and she rejoiced in the God who so blessed all of life. Even when John was dozing through Mass at home, as he usually did, she would, wearing her “I’m for Hillary” button, look over at him with love and with joy. I once made a very big mistake of half-teasingly calling her spirituality “fluffy”. It was effervescent, it was effusive, it was exuberant, but it was not fluffy. She set me straight! It was real, it was not about her but about others and about God and about the world, about the needy, and about her community, her husband, her family, about the gift of life itself. She truly found and rejoiced in God in all things.

Judy and John and I used to go each year for a prolonged lunch at the Rainier Club. We would ask for the table in the bay window. We looked out one year at the St. Patrick’s Day Parade, another year we were there on Hallowe’en, and others year next to the large Christmas tree. I would always get a thank you note back from Judy, once saying how much she enjoyed “enthusiastic people”—which I think was an encouragement for how I should be—and

commenting “not one pompous word was spoken over lunch”, which was her appreciation that I did not lapse into my usual presidential gravitas. Isn’t this, again, all about the joy that radiated within her, her own enthusiasm, that affected or infected others?

From that same expansive joyful exuberance, how she loved to decorate their home. Our Ignatian Prayer Group for couples, whom we called the “Iggys”, always held both our Thanksgiving and Christmas gatherings at their home. Judy outdid herself—if that is possible—with her compliant, dutiful, helper John, in transforming their house into a wonderland of graciousness and beauty. How we looked forward to it! Don’t you think that graciousness and beauty of decorations was a natural expression of herself as a gracious and beautiful person with a festive heart that could not contain itself, that had to welcome and embrace others in God’s giftedness?

Both Hanna before the Prophet Eli, and Mary before her cousin Elizabeth, proclaimed the goodness of God, the fulfillment of God’s promise, because of giving birth: Hanna, supposedly barren, giving birth to Samuel; and Mary, a virgin, pregnant with Jesus. So also for Judy there was no greater blessing and cause for rejoicing than her family, the seven children to whom she gave birth. John, Dew, Dave, Steve, Chris, Mike and Tom, your mother held each of you equally and fully and your families in her heart. You were precious to her, you were the greatest gift to the abundant and fruitful love of Judy and John. Their deaths so close together must leave you bereft, but live always knowing how you were loved. Hannah and Mary have nothing on Judy rejoicing in her God for the gift of children.

Judy suffered pain, especially spinal pain, later in her life. However, her greatest pain—and one you heard all too much about—was their not being able, or in their minds allowed, to go back to Maine these last several years; back to Machias, to Rogue Bluffs, to the family compound Judy knew all her life and where she and John could not wait to go from June through September, and where the family gathered to enjoy all their very unique family rituals. Judy may have known New Canaan, and Seattle, and Omaha, and Seattle again, but the place where she was really, fully, joyfully at home was in Maine. She took me once to show me the small family graveyard on those grounds and to tell me the stories of all who rest there, especially the Longfellows. It is in that family cemetery in the soil of the family gathering place in Maine where the ashes of John and Judy will be buried and marked so that generations of this family may tell the stories of John and Judy with sorrow and a smile. Tell Judy’s with joy; let your soul proclaim the goodness of how God—whom she actually did experience—blessed her with joy and blessed you and us with this beautiful and faith-filled woman.