Remembering Sister Lucy Abbey, IHM


Our sister, Lucy Abbey, after being a child of God, is a child of the Ocean - and a great lover of and seeker after whales. Beginning in her youth, Lucy often roamed the rocks on the coast of New England; climbing, slithering, searching out little nooks to stuff herself into for quiet, or to read, or to pray. She promised herself a return each year to that coast and to a whale watch out on the ocean. I went with her more than once: we saw the great humpbacks breach, pound the water time after time with their fins, then disappear under water with a last flip of their flukes. Once, a tiny calf swam along beside our boat playing with us, then it dove under and came wiggling up on the other side while the mother kept watch. Lucy’s camera lens also kept watch as she ran from one side of the boat to the other. She knew and reverenced those whales and all creatures and was keenly aware of our connectedness to them in the mystery of Life; she treasured most her photographs of these elusive deep-sea travelers.

I want to share another theme that threaded through Lucy’s life. This one from The Wind in the Willows: “One day, Rat and Mole were returning to the riverbank after a long day out…when their path took them through a village. Mole was a bit anxious, but Rat reassured him, ‘Never mind, they’re all safe indoors, …sitting round the fire, men, women, and children, dogs and cats and all.’ So they slipped by unnoticed. Once beyond the village, Rat was leading the way, so he did not notice when Mole stopped in his tracks and sniffed the air. It was one of those mysterious fairy calls that suddenly reached him and made him tingle all over. He sniffed again - and memories came flooding back. Home!”

Lucy cried when she read or heard this passage: she longed for the smell of a home of her own.

Lucy was born in 1946, in a summer house in New London, N.H., where her mother cared for her own invalid mother. Her dad worked in secret for the United States government and soon they relocated to Northern Virginia, from where he disappeared altogether when Lucy was three. Mom, Lucy and Grandmom returned to New England where Lucy’s mother died of leukemia when Lucy was six. Her grandmother, assisted by neighbors Lucy loved, cared for her until her grandmother also died. The neighbors raised Lucy as their own until at 9, when she was removed by the court and placed with her paternal uncle’s family.

Lucy Abbey needed courage, perseverance and creativity to field a childhood with several family constellations in New England, Virginia, New England again and finally, Ardmore, Pa., where she met the IHM Sisters from West Chester.

Lucy was quiet, very curious, very close to nature and brilliant. Her high school classmates relate, “Well, they would announce second honors, then first honors, then Lucy Abbey with distinguished honors.” Even by that time, Lucy was consistently described as someone who had overcome great obstacles and emerged a generous, caring, gentle person.
At the breaking open of the Civil Rights Movement, September 1963, Lucy entered her first of two IHM communities, West Chester, Pa. She took for herself the motto, “That I may be faithful.” Lucy says her early religious life was profoundly formed by the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy and his brother Bobby Kennedy, but most deeply by the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. “I began to see racism as America’s original sin” she said, “and I wanted to be part of the solution, not part of the problem.”

In 19 years on mission as a West Chester IHM, Lucy taught first, fourth, seventh and eighth grades; six years of high school Spanish and six of high school religion - this in six cities, in six dioceses, each with different curricula. She always singled out the average and poor students, to help them realize their gifts and foster a strong sense of themselves.

Lucy relates that besides the Civil Rights events, she was influenced by the Second Vatican Council. “It ‘made sense’ to me for us as vowed religious to reexamine our lives and our charisms so that we could be present to people in their joys and sorrows, hopes and anxieties.” The eastern IHMs were not moving in this direction and finally Lucy made a momentous decision. “I left the Philadelphia community because my heart was divided. I could not be zealous because I felt weighted down by the struggles in the congregation…”

Lucy discerned a transfer here, to her second IHM congregation, Monroe, Mich. “I felt at home, people had the same sense of commitment. This was really in accord with how I think. This is how I want to live religious life.”

Hearkening to her determination to be “part of the solution, not part of the problem,” Lucy chose to work as social justice advocate at Groundwork for a Just World on the east side of Detroit and to live in Detroit with Sister Anne Crimmins.

16 of her years as a Monroe IHM were spent with the people of St. Suzanne’s parish, Detroit. At St. Suzanne’s, Lucy found a true partnership with Fr. Dennis Duggan, and before long with lay minister Joanie Scott. She says, “I was interested in the quality of life in the neighborhood as well as the faith inside the parish.” Lucy attended to everyone. She had the gift to meet each one where she found them. Lucy exercised unending patience. I remember week after week for years she waited in the auditorium for kids to show up for a reading program or adults for a Bible study she was starting; she rounded up materials, she handmade activities. Two people showed up - late. Two more people the next time. One the next time. Then the kids carried on. During the week someone got in and wrecked her whole set-up. Literally for years Lucy hung in where there were few signs of hope: “the kids really need this.” Today, there is a thriving set of programs, under the auspices of Don Bosco, but born of Lucy’s vision and faithfulness and networking.

Lucy was characterized by a gift for penetrating analytical analysis, while at the same time she kept 20 projects in process in the basement, many to do with children, and five more percolating in that brain of hers at any given time.

One day she had been really quiet, looking out her dining room window. She suddenly said, “I have a home there. St Suzanne’s has become my home.”

She also said, very clearly from the get-go that her goal at St. Suzanne’s was to build faith and neighborhood programs the people needed and prepare the people themselves to take over the leadership. “Then my work here will be finished,” she would say.
I thought so many times of St. Alphonsus, whose spirit we follow, climbing down the mountainside, using plain language to explain to the shepherds how much God loved them. Lucy lived our IHM charism, quietly and genuinely. Seeking out the most marginalized in whom she saw genuine potential. She mentored young people, - Joanie says she became their Auntie - especially young boys who have grown into young men, through tragic circumstances toward a sense of stability and pride.

Sister Lucy Abbey was/is a valiant woman. She lived her cancer with characteristic courage. “I want to LIVE,” she said, “I have things to finish at St. Christopher’s,” where she was most recently doing neighborhood organizing.

These last two weeks, when it was clear to her that the cancer had gotten too far ahead of her, and she was mostly breathing quietly, we saw in her favorite Psalms for Praying book, pages folded down and underlined or highlighted.

What stood out for me was that each of those psalms addressed “the Beloved.” They are the songs of a bride to her loved one. Perhaps even Lucy did not fully realize it, but her work here was completed, and she was more than ready to meet her God. In Psalm 31, she underlined this:

“Into your hands I commend my soul,
For your Heart is my home.”

Psalms for Praying: An Invitation to Wholeness
Nan C. Merrill

Written by: Connie Supan, IHM
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Celebration of Life – Lucy Abbey

In one of her Ministry Commitment Forms, Lucy recalled the invitation of Jesus to live life to the fullest. Lucy did just that for 68 years. I share these reflections with you based on not only my experience but with the experience our Kairos Mission Unit and that of so many whose lives were touched by Lucy. Being orphaned at an early age, Lucy searched for home and found a home with the people with whom she ministered, the Kairos Mission Unit and a network of IHMs who walked various journeys with Lucy.

One image of Lucy someone shared with me was that of a packed car. I am sure if each of us ponders that image, we can relate and imagine what she had packed in that car! I imagine the car packed with books; Lucy was an avid reader, searching for the answers to many questions. I would guess there was more than one occasion she had an overdue book to the Motherhouse library! Lucy had a keen mind and a great intellectual ability, which stemmed back to her elementary and high school years where special awards were created for her in high school. Most of all, in this “car” she packed what she thought might be needed to serve God’s people.

The reading from the prophet Isaiah speaks of going to the mountain. Lucy did that figuratively and in her life. The first time I met Lucy, we went on a hike in the White Mountains of
New Hampshire. Lucy had many mountains to climb in her life and she approached each one with courage, faith and optimism. This was particularly true with the latest mountain she climbed, and she has arrived now where God will wipe away every tear. On this mountain, God has prepared a rich banquet for Lucy, welcoming her into God’s presence.

These readings that were carefully chosen for today’s celebration reflect Lucy’s search for God and her trust in God’s love throughout her life. In the reading from Romans, Paul reminds us that the suffering we experience is nothing compared to the glory that will be revealed to us. Lucy’s journey in life was not an easy one at times, yet she walked that journey trusting in the presence of her loving God. Paul also reminds us that all creation is waiting for the revelation of God. Lucy loved creation and the gifts it has to offer. At our last Mission Unit meeting, which Lucy co-facilitated, she spoke of her love for the cosmos. She did miss the East though, and I understood that, hearing her speak of the mountains and the ocean. In the reading cited from her page in the Book of Life, like Moses, she states that she heard God say, “Am I not the God of the (Midwest) as well?” Gradually, Lucy found her home here in Michigan. She was always ready to enjoy nature, inviting others to take a walk in Elizabeth Park or in other areas. Lucy was ready to explore and walk with others. She journeyed with women in formation and the people of Detroit in the parishes that she served.

As I read Lucy’s Ministry Commitment Forms, she realized her call as an educator. She stated that she saw her role as one who “draws out and helps people develop themselves and their abilities for their own liberation and contribution to the world.” She used a word from Jean Houston’s work, that of an evocateur – one calling forth new ways to the liberating mission of Jesus. She continued to see herself as an educator but felt called to go beyond the classroom, to Groundwork For a Just World on the east side of Detroit and subsequently to parishes in the city of Detroit. Lucy’s latest ministry of a community organizer was a place she felt at home, wanting to reach out to the people and help them find their voice for change.

In her first Ministry Commitment Form as she began the journey as a Monroe IHM, Lucy was particularly drawn to the 1987 Assembly Directions. Her next 25 years were spent dedicated to collaborative ministry working with the people of Detroit, the materially poor and oppressed. Lucy lived the spirit of Affirmation 10, standing in solidarity with those who suffer, participating in the shaping of a new world order and nurturing a spirit of reconciling and healing community among ourselves and beyond. The theme of Lucy’s incorporation was, “Let Our Hearts Be Bold.” She lived with that boldness.

In the Gospel of Matthew, the words of Jesus describe Lucy, “Whatever you did for one of these least ones, you did for me.” She fed the hungry, meeting the people in their neighborhoods; she brought the water of her presence to those who were thirsty; she reached out to the stranger and offered to walk with that person; she clothed the people with care and compassion; she visited the people in their homes and communities; she found her home with the people. On Tuesday, our loving God said to Lucy, “Come, you whom I blessed, welcome to the home I have prepared for you.”

We celebrate and give thanks for the life of Lucy and today we celebrate that she has arrived home.

Written and delivered by: Mary Jane Herb, IHM