

**Remembering Marita-Constance Supan, IHM**  
**July 31, 1945 - April 21, 2025**

To remember Marita-Constance Supan, to say anything worthy of her life and her death, we must begin where she began: out East on the shore. Yes, to Norfolk, Virginia, where Connie was born to Mary Gregory and Robert Francis on July 31, 1945. But also, to Baltimore, Maryland, where, some 100 years earlier in 1845, a young black woman named Theresa Maxis Duchemin set out on her own journey and in 1845 became the co-founder of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary - the very community to which Connie would find her way.

Perhaps it was pure chance-perhaps Providence-that the ocean waters that splashed upon the Virginia shore also happened to be the same that made their way up Chesapeake Bay to the inner harbor of Baltimore. Both Connie and Theresa would start at the shore and go west, following their heart and the call of God deep within.



I don't know the fullness of who Connie is and was. Like many of you, I was a companion on the journey at a juncture here and there and know pieces of her life. In this Remembering, I will miss all of the major relationships, events and stories of Connie's life. This even after talking with her dear friends, neighbors, comrades in the peace community, sisters in Monroe and the East, and clinical colleagues. And how much more could we know Connie by hearing from her family and those who grew up with her? Yet, even if we were all to share about Connie, we would still be missing the many things she held deep within her heart. Things that inspired her, delighted her, and yes, even things that terrified her. Known only to God, this inner world of Connie was both her greatest suffering and greatest gift.

The landscape of Connie's inner world was vast. It was as deep and as wide as the ocean she so adored. "I am immersed in this peace and beauty and this constancy of the ocean," Connie wrote in her journal while on a retreat in Maine. Yes, peace and beauty, she noted, "but primarily the sea" (Jan. 6, 2006, Maine). The ocean. The great waters - so calm on some days that it looks like a smooth sheet of glass reflecting perfectly the heavens above. And on other days - tumultuous, dark and stormy, enough to take away your breath and your life. Powerful, deep, revealing and unrevealing; quiet and constant, sudden and spontaneous. In this space, Connie found herself and her God.

Life with Connie was not unlike being friends with an ocean. One day might bring a day at the jail where she taught English to those who were incarcerated. The next would bring a hilarious and harrowing canoe trip down the River Raisin in hopes of reenacting Theresa Maxis Duchemin's entry into Monroe! One moment, the Southern Belle of Norfolk would chastise you about some matter, saying, "Now, sister..." and the next she'd be cursing like a sailor! She was tenderhearted and at the same time fearless. Pensive, reflective and determined yet insecure and unsure. She was complicated yet simple. It might seem to us that Connie was wildly chaotic and inconveniently spontaneous - and indeed she was - but in reality, what we were experiencing was the constancy, the fidelity of a woman struggling and delighting in being herself. Connie never veered - at least not for long - from fidelity to the ocean of her being ... faithful to the ups and downs, faithful to the pain and the suffering, and faithful to the delight and

wonder of even the simplest of things.

How does one befriend an ocean? Here's a tip from Connie herself in a journal entry during one of her many visits to the shore. (June 2011)

"Today, Thursday. Hot! Yah! Hottest I've ever had here ... I waded deep, picked up shells for kids, [driftwood for me] ... [and] two minuscule dead crabs to mount for the boys. [And] I learned to be friends with the beautiful kelp - It was in the low, low tide shallows. I can swim with it now and respect it. Off [now] to the P.O. for immigration [documents]!"

Just like Connie and the kelp, we have each learned to be friends with the ocean that is Connie. We learned to swim with her and to respect her. I think that is ultimately what Connie longed for. Not to understand her, not to placate her, and definitely not to tell her what to do! We ALL know how that would end.

Bill Wylie-Kellerman, a friend of Connie's in the Larkins neighborhood and Detroit Peace Community, mentioned to me many of the amazing things Connie had done for the people of Detroit and how beloved she was. But he also noted that Connie "was a notorious feeder and defender of stray cats and in that matter crossed swords with neighbors who thought differently." Honestly, can we really count ourselves as friends of Connie if we *haven't* crossed swords with her at least once?

And yes, the Detroit Peace Community. Be sure to talk to Bill, Fr. Tom and IHM Sisters for more about Connie's commitment to her beloved Detroit and the hard work for peace. So much to our dear Connie. The peace work, Women and Children Sanctuary, jail ministry, children and play therapy, immigration, religious education, her research and writings, her scholarship in childhood trauma, her backpacking along the Escalante River, trips to "The Urchin" retreat house in Maine, family and friends, and her beloved Theresa Maxis Duchemin and her IHM community.

There are two particular moments in Connie's life that I want to share now. Even though they both happened in the flash of a moment, they impacted the whole trajectory of her life. I'll let Connie tell you herself.

[It was the winter of 1984 in Philadelphia.]

That year, I lived in a room in someone else's house, wore clothes from women who had died or who had updated their wardrobes, and rode the subway to my center-city workplace. Each day I passed the "homeless" .... I hated my own discomfort in the face of their need: the vague sense of anger at not knowing quite what to do, the disquiet that stayed with me when I had gone on my way without responding.

I felt wary, unwilling to open myself to what might be the con. "I have so little," I told myself. (It was true; I couldn't be sure of paying my way through the month.) "I already spend my day settling refugees. Really, how much can I do?" My mumblings did little to ease the knot in my stomach as I edged past forlorn figures, the defenses behind my eyes clicking into place.

One particular evening, ... I made for the subway stairs and counted on the brief warmth of the station. I remember the shock of finding myself face to face with a man about my

age. His raw hands bled onto the sagging Styrofoam plate of hot food he held; his face registered desperation. He had too little clothing for a night of crippling cold, too few resources for the life swirling around him.

My eyes locked into his, and something inside me gave way. All the careful distance I had placed between myself and struggling people “out there” evaporated. My defenses against his need, so radical a reflection of my own, crumbled. It was a moment of *seeing*—seeing the differences and the sameness, seeing myself and him and the small act of caring someone else had done by simply buying a hot plate of food for a hungry person.

The clarity of that moment, the painful light it cast on another person so like me and on my fears, is etched somewhere in the center of me. I lose it, but never entirely; I close down again, but it returns, calling for a deep breath and action.

Do you see what she saw? Do you see who, in our world today, is in need of healing ... and a hot plate of food?

The second moment I share with you is that moment at the turn of the millennia that two cars collided, and Connie barely walked away alive. The car accident that changed everything. It was devastating for Connie. Early on, Connie saw this as a kind of setback, though deep within, she understood she was forever changed. She wrote, “I believe my task this season is to accept and learn from the severe limits [that] recent car accident injuries have placed on me. Grace and the universe have conspired to slow me down in ways that are likely needed—but altogether new.” (*IHM Ministry Commitment Form 2000-01*)

The accident cascaded into a series of health struggles for Connie - physically, mentally and spiritually. In 2020, Connie wrote:

I have had two closed head injuries, which affected executive function in my frontal cortex, three strokes, a heart valve replacement and a heart attack. The executive-function thing has made me even slower than my southern-self used to be and easily overwhelmed when too many expectations come all at me. I need an extraordinarily long time. I can't improve it: this is the brain and [the] slowed, easily tired self I have been left with. It's incredibly frustrating and if I get nagged over and over, I cannot do better, and I feel stalked ...

In many ways, this year has turned out to be a nightmare for me.... I don't make phone calls or write to friends. I can't go out—even to get an ice cream cone, groceries, cat food and drugstore supplies.... I am surviving by a thread. Not having choices, not being able to go anywhere except these two rooms, always having the experience of drowning, I can't swim at all, let alone faster.

Connie would not want our pity now or back then. She wanted to be seen. She wanted to live on her own terms with the wildly unique inner world and ocean that she had been given. Connie worked hard to parse out and to lovingly care for the generational trauma and shame that was woven into her very DNA and for the various traumas contrarities that impacted her. Her world, though bright and clear, was again, like the ocean, also dark and stormy. But Connie found her home here as well, making even the darkness her home.

She writes, “Before her death in a Nazi concentration camp, Etty Hillesum wrote with a wisdom born of darkness.” She wrote out a quote from Etty: “I feel at home. I have learned so much

about it here. We are at home. Under the sky. In every place on Earth. If only we carry everything with us.”

Connie indeed carried everything with her. Literally and metaphorically, everything. From her traumas, Connie carried many scars. In her writings and her scholarly work, Connie noted that even though there is healing after a trauma, the scar never goes away. You can't get rid of it. Sometimes she even wished she had scars on her own body so that she'd have a visible representation of the deep scars within her.

Again, this is not for pity or for gaping. It is to see Connie for who she is. For it is these very experiences and scars that informed Connie ... she who is the person who loved others so deeply, especially those who were most vulnerable and abandoned. Those who had lost everything. Those who were cast to the outskirts of society, trod upon and thrown away as trash. These people were Connie's and she was theirs. Connie saw them and herself in the Crucified and Risen Christ, the Christ whom she knew both intimately and cosmically.

Connie allowed herself, blessed and broken, to be manna for others.

And this is perhaps why she so identified with Theresa Maxis Duchemin, a wildly creative and intelligent woman just like Connie, who also struggled and perhaps even despaired. Connie also felt connected to Theresa when she was in exile that is, when Theresa left the IHM community because of the vitriol of racism, sexism and clericalism aimed against her in order to save the IHM community she so loved. Connie writes,

So, like Teresa in exile, I embrace [the] mystery of God's will; I strive for greater simplicity of living, to offer generous hospitality as I can, Jesus' preferential option for those most small and struggling, most marginalized, which Alphonsus embodied, and Gillet and Theresa after him. And IHM “all down the years ... They relied on God's constancy, on the real grace of Providence.

And so did Connie.

Connie, our dear, dear friend - our sibling, our aunt, our comrade for peace, our neighbor, our IHM Sister - never forget: you are ours and we are yours.

We bid farewell to Connie with this prayer she made to God:

I present myself to be present to You, open, listening. I offer you once more all that I am and do and have—all of my longing and strivings, all that I rejoice in, wonder at, suffer. Thank you for these beautiful, amazing creatures you allow to be with me. Teach me how best to love them.

***Written and delivered by Julie Viera, IHM, April 25, 2025***