

With Thanksgiving for the Life of
Mary Amanda (Wee) Maxwell
Dec. 19 1935 + Dec. 28 2020
Psalm 42, Eph5:13-16a, (and “Draba”)

“Awake, O sleeper, rise from death.”

A refrain that I heard regularly from Mary in the past three or so months—and maybe you’d heard it, too—was that each day she was surprised she’d awoken in Madison, Wisconsin. She kept thinking she’d wake up in heaven and wondered why she hadn’t.

Before that phrase, she was already looking that direction. This past summer, even though her doctor said her test numbers were looking good, that the cancer drug was effective, still Mary kept saying she was feeling closer to the end.

Further back than that, this spring Mary cheerily described her diagnosis and said “not many of us know what we are going to die from.” She said it to me while on her hands and knees picking spinach from the food pantry garden.

So, going back through the ending wind-down or the further sense of her impending death while still very much alive, Mary displayed an awful lot of acceptance. Awful in that I know some of you felt more like it was resignation, and wanted her to think about it differently, to fight harder, to keep going.

I don’t argue with that. When Mary wondered to me why she kept waking up in Madison, I had some twinkling inkling, thinking partly I wasn’t praying for her death; I was praying to get to keep her around longer, to keep living, with us.

I guess even in the end of her living, she did it well, a completion of life.

But Mary is hard to let go because she lived so beautifully, making the most of life. I counted her as a kindred spirit, but she was so much more than I that I certainly can’t lay extra claim to her. Her kindred spirit of living was also for the children of the school forest. She was kindred with almost everybody who moved into Oakwood, eager to get to know them. And, in broader community, it was for the native plants of the Oakwood woods, and for the MCC prairie restoration she so regularly tended with Lois and Hildy. She shared that spark

in her presence for most every adult ed session, eager to learn and engage, whatever the topic.

She did much of life that way, but maybe particularly her faith. As one example, some of the shape of this service comes from a list five decades old. But in another list from two years ago, she had her #2 hymn choice for her funeral as “This Is My Father’s World.” We ended up not singing it today, though, because in her own old hymnal, it was all marked up. The title was crossed out and changed to “This Is My *Mother’s* World,” and then that was crossed out for “This Is Our Wondrous World.” Instead of “He shines in all that’s fair,” she jotted in “with hands I give it care.” At the top she noted “sexist,” while at the bottom it says “But I still like it.” Ha! That’s Mary’s engagement.



Especially dear to me was that about three years ago, when we had such a large group of youth interested in going to the Boundary Waters we kept pleading for adult chaperones, and it was Mary who stepped up, questioned and maybe even challenged by her friends in circle, but also celebrated. At the first portage, she lifted a canoe onto her shoulders, but after decided her doctor probably wouldn’t approve of putting that stress on her replaced...was it hip?

Reflective with her little book of poetry, her knowledge of the natural surroundings, and reflective of the expanse of her life, she talked

much of her first trip up there as a teenager with her dad and uncle and cousin, when (as the only female) she had to do all the menu planning, including being sure the men had good coffee.

She carried her own as she paddled along with and engaged that batch of teenagers, sleeping on the ground next to them in a tent. In our last campsite of that trip, she was still reflecting on other trips and said with tears in her eyes that that was probably her final trip to the Boundary Waters.

I keep finding my own tears as I recall that of her, and much else.

Mary, who could have tears in her eyes, and then her beaming smile.

Mary, who this summer was relieved to be able to get to the cabin, even if she wasn't going to have strength to swim or to paddle, but still to be in that good place with good people.

Mary, who tried to sing along from the 4th floor when a group of carolers stood in the woods to sing up to her a week before she died.

Mary, who loved you and was loved by you, Max and Everett and much more family and friends.

Mary, the mother who shaped you, Beth and Amy, and whose reflection lives on in you.

Mary, who was the wife who always knew what she wanted and told you how things would go, Ken.

And there's much more I could say. On the other hand, what more can I say?

Mary showed us, I think, how to live, making the most of the time. Hopefully there are some elements of that in songs and her spirit in this service today, in poems and words she loved.

Mary showed us, perhaps, how to die.

Still more even than that, Mary showed us faith, confident in the one who held her life, her death, her eternity. And so maybe today some of what we gain isn't just remembering her or celebrating her, nor finding room for our own grief, our own smiles and tears.

Maybe today we understand and appreciate and find our own inkling of trust that Mary had in the One whose love and life hold her now and forever, and her son, as well. And maybe that confidence can grab hold of us, too, for our days now, and with Mary forever to come.