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Dear Friends,

As I write this, my soon-to-be-91-year-old mother is on the high seas somewhere en route from Martha's Vineyard to Newport on a week's tour of New England ports. To make this trip she negotiated time off from her regular job in the alumnae and development office of the Ursuline Academy, a Roman Catholic girls' high school in a suburb of St. Louis very similar to Ridgewood. She started working at Ursuline in the fall of 1965 when I, the youngest of my parents' two children, went away (quite prematurely, in her view) to St. George's School, an Episcopal boarding school in Newport, Rhode Island.

Finding Mom a Job For months before my actual departure, she made vague declarations about intending to go back to work. Seeing no signs of this intent turning into action, I began to search the want ads of a neighborhood newspaper in the hope of having my mother firmly established so I could set off with a reasonably clear conscience. Finally, as the end of summer was coming dangerously close, I found a listing for a typing teacher, an area in which my mother had both extensive experience and remarkable talent, at a local Roman Catholic girls' high school.

Thelma Hartnett had grown up as a Methodist in a rice farming community in rural Arkansas, and she became an Episcopalian when she married my father just before he shipped out as an infantry lieutenant for World War II. In those pre-Vatican II days, the gap between Roman Catholics and other Christians was much greater than it is now. There is a large and strong Roman community in St. Louis, and even though the sight of nuns, always in pairs, in the flowing black habits, and highly starched head pieces, was common in our area, as a family we had had few personal contacts and fewer conversations with Roman Catholic "religious"—a term which I later learned was, in addition to being an adjective, also a noun describing men and women who had taken the traditional vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience and lived in formal communities.

What Goes Around....Having, at 14, little sense of what might seem in prospect a socially awkward conversation, I made it my mission to ensure that my mother would call the number in the ad to get an initial interview. To that end, I made comments about the older generation having no work ethic, I rolled my eyes and sighed heavily when the topic of fall activities came up, and I generally drew on

all the skills I had observed over the years as appropriate to motivate a reluctant subject. It was, after all, only for her own good. Surely just an interview would not be so difficult. Once she went, she would not have to accept an offer. Sometimes exploring an unfamiliar option can be a growing experience, and, for the grand finale, Was it really so much to ask.....

As she tells the story, Thelma did everything a polite, well-brought-up woman could to make that initial telephone inquiry non-productive, but the Mother Superior was very glad to hear from her and quickly set up an appointment for them to meet. At this point in her life “Hell’s Bells” was not something my mother said out loud in front of me, but in retrospect I am reasonably sure that was the substance of her inner dialogue as she hung up the phone.

In the interview itself, she reports that she opened with her strongest argument as to why she was completely unsuitable for the position: as she sat down, she announced that she had been Raised As A Methodist and Was Now an Episcopalian.

No Plan B I do not know exactly what response she was expecting at that point, but whatever it was, it was not what the Mother Superior said, which was something along the lines of “I am so glad to know that, now tell me more about yourself.” Having placed all of her confidence in the destructive power of her opening line, Thelma had prepared no other deal-breakers to be subsequently deployed, and so she simply entered into the conversation. She talked about her family, her background, her teaching experience, and the other topics which came up, gradually ceasing to see across the desk a woman dressed for the 14th century, but rather an engaging partner with a sharp intelligence, sympathetic ear, and twinkling eye.

At the end, she was offered the position. In the course of their warm and engaging time together, the Mother Superior had basically boxed her into a place where the only possible answer was “Yes.” In retrospect, I suppose I am glad they were only looking for a member of their faculty, and not their Order, for whatever the question had been, I think my mother probably would have replied in the affirmative.

And so it came to pass And so, in late August 1965, when Lyndon Johnson was President, as the St. Louis Arch was just being completed, when Bob Gibson was pitching for the St. Louis Cardinals, and when St. Louis was still basking in the glory of the Mercury space capsules having been made locally by McDonnell Aircraft, it came to pass that Thelma began to teach typing and shorthand to Roman Catholic high school girls in suburban St. Louis.

And not long after, when I would be home on school vacations, I would occasionally hear my mother talk about what “we Catholics” thought or did. Many years later, when my father died, a very large portion of the congregation at the funeral came from the Ursuline community, with the Mother Superior leading them forward to take communion at a Eucharist celebrated by the woman who was the rector of our home parish and with the Bishop of Missouri (Sarah Strauss’s father, The Rt. Rev. Hays Rockwell) present and blessing us all. One of the things I discovered from my mother’s experience is that sometimes nuns are a little ahead of the curve, and, contrary to all of the portrayals in the media, tend to be wise, thoughtful, and often very funny.

Serviam When Thelma began teaching, she was one of two lay people on the faculty. Many decades later when she finished working in the classroom, the ratio had reversed and the overwhelming majority of the teachers were lay people, and, but for religion courses, nuns had

become rare in the classroom. Throughout those years the school's motto was "Serviam," and raising young women to value and to practice service to others as a core personal value was at the heart of their educational mission. While it is good to be smart, perhaps it is smarter to be good, and the succession of nuns and lay people who led the school kept their focus clear from one administration to another.

In addition to typing and shorthand, in the classroom she had developed a course on Consumer Economics, basically an introduction to individual and household money management. A great many of these students worked after school and on weekends to contribute to their tuition, and they were very interested in learning how best to manage their finances. The girls became accustomed to hearing her talk, and talk in wise, practical terms, about money.

Value, and Values....And part of what she taught them was the value of giving. We would call it "stewardship" but I suspect she did not use that term very much with them. But what she did stress was the value to ourselves, to our souls and to our basic identity, of giving and giving generously. In a school dedicated to raising people to understand and live a life of "service," giving was a natural part of the curriculum, and education was as much a matter of the soul and heart as of the mind.

Nuns basically never retire. You take your vows for life, and one of the things I discovered and came greatly to admire about the Ursuline order was the way, as their members aged, their work would be redefined to suit their abilities and interests. So when my mother approached what would have been retirement in another kind of system, they adjusted her schedule, and, when she decided to leave classroom teaching, they offered her a position in the alumnae and development office.

And by the time my mother left work in the classroom, she had taught a substantial percentage of the living alumnae of the school. She had often taught many members of one family spread over at least two generations. And, as a gifted teacher, she had established a personal rapport with just about everyone who went through her courses. Among her duties in her new position was being in touch with graduates of all ages who had been brought up to value serving others, who had often worked to pay for their own education, and most of whom had heard from Thelma about both the duty and the benefits of being a giver within the context of managing money, even in tight budgets. In the course of these conversations, she would ask them if they could help with the scholarship funds for the current students. You can perhaps imagine the result.

Always on the lookout for new projects, Thelma created a challenge fund for the faculty to support scholarships, a project which, for reasons that I do not entirely understand, required her at one point to dress up as a bear. As had her work with the alumnae, this fund exceeded all of its expectations.

Shorter is better. Don't laugh My mother recently told me (some years too late) that her sense from her school experience was that long letters outlining in detail the rationale or theology of giving are not nearly as effective as a short note or personal conversation, in person or over the phone. She has always approached her work as offering a gift to the people with whom she spoke. She was not asking for a sacrifice: she was offering people the chance to view themselves, for once, not as customers, clients, purchasers, or as a "market," but as givers, donors, philanthropists, and even faithful stewards—people entrusted with money for the purpose of doing good in the world.

That understanding—giving is a benefit to the giver before it is to the recipient—has made a big impact on me. It is counter-cultural, and maybe also counter-intuitive, but it is not crazy. Thelma

has said over and over—and I have watched her live this for decades—that after giving, you have more than you had before—your net worth is increased, not diminished, by putting money to “service” for the good of others and for the sake of God. When we give—and not when we think of it as “buying” a service, a commodity, or a set of benefits, but when we make a genuine free gift offering—we come perhaps our closest to imitating God. The challenge—and it is a real one—is to develop the wisdom, insight, and courage to look at the world, and ourselves, from a perspective which goes beyond materialism. The material is real and it matters, but to think that the material is all that there is falls short of a full description of our lives and our world.

“Giving” or “Buying?” The idea of “giving” rather than “buying” is rare in our culture. Good gifts are symbols of something deeper—affection, thanks, a desire to honor, a commitment to support, a desire to be a partner in a work that we value. As important as the substance—the material gift—may be, it is what the gift represents which is the greater thing, and the more experienced we become in giving, the wiser we grow in understanding the value, and the limits, of the substance of what we share. Giving reminds money that it is not in charge. Giving frees us for a more expansive view of life and a more interesting understanding of what it means to be “rich.”

My mother learned about the value of giving from the family in which she grew up on an Arkansas farm in the Depression. They were never rich, but they were always givers. And somehow although their bank balance may never have been large, they were never poor. She learned from my father, who from the first days of their marriage said that he believed strongly that if they paid their pledge to the church first, they would always have enough. They did, and they did. She learned from the nuns of the Ursuline order who pledged their very lives to raising up generations of women who would understand and practice service, for their own sake and for the sake of the world.

Thelma is a smart woman—she paid attention, she saw what made for good lives, and she developed her own understanding and practice of stewardship.

Two Mothers... Looking back to that interview in the summer of 1965, I would have to say that in the room there were two Mothers Superior. One was the leader of an established religious community, the other was in the early stages of extending her care beyond her own immediate family to a network of hundreds of girls (and one future priest) whom she would teach about the way of service and the life of giving. It is characteristic of God’s sense of humor that God would use the nagging of a 14-year-old son about to set off to an Episcopal School to bring his Methodist mother into the convent to which she, in years to come, would bring a steady stream of strong financial support, so that future generations might come to understand the transforming power of service and giving. We believe in one holy, catholic, and apostolic church, and there is, for me, something particularly gratifying to see it in action not just in our buildings on a particular Sunday, but over decades in our families, our communities, and in our world.

This is about ten times longer than my mother would have written, but then she’s a lot better at this than I am. But I have learned enough from her to invite you to think of yourself as a giver and to look upon your giving as one way to grow more fully into the person God has always meant you to be. My mother gave that gift to me, and I think she intended for me to pass it on.

The Rev. Cn. John G. Hartnett