

THE METAPHORICAL MARY

If I had to sum up Mary in one phrase, I think it would be this: She lives on the outskirts. This sentence says so much. Ever since I have known Mary, and our friendship began 55 years ago, when I was a student of hers at the University of Iowa, she has lived on the outskirts.

In Iowa City she lived on the outskirts of town, where she could have horses. And at the University she lived on the outskirts of the academic establishment. Although she was probably the most popular teacher, and most charismatic figure, on campus, she was not an academic. She lived on the outskirts of the Academy.

And she was just as much the outsider when it came to the social and political fashions of the day. I remember when Henry Wallace, the Progressive Party candidate, was running for President. An off-campus rally was held in his support. This was in Iowa City. A well-known folk singer was featured, and he sang a song titled "Keep Your Hands On the Plow." Afterward, Mary was heard to remark: "All my life I've been trying to get my hands off the plow."

As time went on, Mary continued to live on the outskirts. The older she became, the further out she seemed to get -- living always on top of a hill, at the end of a long, winding road that was almost impassable. In Southern California, when she was teaching at UCLA, she lived in a hilltop castle on the outskirts of a small community called Agoura. Agoura was on the outskirts of Los Angeles. Mary was living on the outskirts of the outskirts, you might say. Later, here in Santa Cruz, where she still resides, she moved to an even higher hill, at the end of an even longer road that was even more impassable.

Mary once told me of an incident that happened to her when she was living in Agoura. It was an event, she said, that seemed to sum up her whole life. It was a Sunday morning, and she was returning from church in Los Angeles. Those familiar with Los Angeles know that the city proper is separated from the San Fernando Valley by the Hollywood Hills. A road runs along the crest of these hills. It is called Mulholland Drive, and is very sparsely populated. Stretches of the road aren't even paved. It is quite a remote and desolate area. Mary said that driving home from church she found herself on Mulholland Drive heading west. And she noticed that she was almost out of gas. She came

to a fork in the road, one branch leading down to the Valley, where she could quickly find a gas station, the other branch continuing along the crest of the hills, leading to who-knew-where. Now which branch do you -- you who know Mary -- think she took? The safe, sensible way? Or its opposite? Of course, she chose the latter. Even as she was making this choice, she told me, laughingly, she realized how perverse it was, and that it was really the story of her life -- choosing to stay on the ridge of the hill -- choosing the unknown over the predictable -- choosing to live on the edge of the abyss.

That's the way I would describe Mary -- she lives on the outskirts, at the edge of the abyss.

And yet -- and this is the strange thing -- when you visit Mary, living there on the outskirts at the edge of the abyss -- when you labor up that long, twisting road and finally reach the top -- when at last you find yourself in her presence -- it feel-s as-if you are at the CENTER of things -- not on the outskirts at all. It is a real paradox. There she is, living on the outskirts at the edge of the abyss, yet in the Center. This is Mary.

Yes, there she is, living at the Center, and it is we, it seems, who are living on the perimeter. Some of us may be edging closer to the abyss than is comfortable, perhaps, but there she is, high on top of the hill, as always. Recently the road has been upgraded, providing the illusion of her greater accessibility. For this -- for even the illusion -- we must be grateful, all of us. Hail Mary!

Frantic Charles
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