

Eulogy for Jean Clift

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I would like to start with a poem by my mother's favorite poet, Emily Dickinson.

If I can stop one Heart from breaking
I shall not live in vain
If I can ease one Life the Aching
Or cool one Pain

Or help one fainting Robin
Unto his Nest again
I shall not live in Vain. [372]

It feels, to me, as if Emily knew my mother. Jean devoted her life to helping fellow seekers find the meaning of God, love, and our place in the world. Hers was truly an amazing life. I would like to share with you today a few milestones along her spiritual journey.

In the past year and a half, it has been my greatest joy to share a treasure with my mother. During the later years of World War II, when Jean was in high school, her father was stationed at Pearl Harbor. Her parents wrote to each other every day, almost without fail. Amazingly, they saved these letters -- about 800 of them! Every week when I called her, I would read her a few of the letters. It was a joy, in her last years, to give her such a clear view of her childhood.

On one of these occasions, when a certain friend of hers was mentioned, Mom stopped to tell me a story about this friend. First let me say that going to church was not a high priority in Jean's family. I think they went for the big services, and maybe a few other times. On this occasion, Jean went to a religious event with her high school friend. I think it was a lecture or inspirational talk of some sort. Toward the end, the attendees were invited to come forward to receive a blessing. Jean, I think much to her own surprise, said to her friend "I think I want to go up there!" Her friend, apparently a very practical girl, replied "Well go on, silly." I think this was my mother dipping a toe into the water that would carry her through her life.

The next vignette I would like to share with you may be our most iconic family story. You might say that it is a core image of my parents' lives. They met in a law firm, dated very quickly, and were married within seven months. They were on the road to being a power couple of wealthy Southern attorneys.

One day in church, they each separately felt a call: they felt, with unexplainable certainty, that Wallace should become a priest. They were each very afraid to share this news with the other, since it would mean walking away from their millionaire future. Finally, bravery prevailed, and they found with joy that they had received an incredible gift. No dipping of toes this time; they

dove together into the unknown waters. They followed their bliss and the current carried them through their lives together.

My last story comes a few decades later, after their children had all left home. In going through my parents' possessions recently, I found a box that my father had clearly used to hold some of his most special papers. Included in this box was a copy of a 1987 letter from my mother. She was on retreat in Kentucky, praying about a very big decision that she was making: the decision to enter the priesthood.

Unlike Wallace, Jean did not go to seminary. However, with the encouragement of the leaders of her diocese, and a copy of the church's Canon Laws, she had found a way that it could work. The Episcopal church, in its great wisdom, had opened the door to proven spiritual leaders in the community, giving them a path to the Diaconate and subsequently the Priesthood. I will never forget the excitement in her voice when she shared this decision with me. It was the fulfilment of her spiritual journey. She was being baptized all over again: a lifetime of love given and love received, washing over her and making her whole.

In closing, I will again let Emily speak for my mother.

Tie the Strings to my Life, My Lord,
Then, I am ready to go!
Just a look at the Horses --
Rapid! That will do!

Goodbye to the Life I used to live --
And the World I used to know --
And kiss the Hills, for me, just once --
Then -- I am ready to go! [77]

Quoted by Jean from the 1985 Canon: "a person of Christian character, proven fitness, and leadership in [their] community, who is willing to serve in the capacity of Deacon without relinquishing [their] secular occupation [may be proposed] for the Diaconate and subsequently for the Priesthood."