

Loretta's "Black Dog"

Another Classic Franciscan

By Julia Pearson, SFO

I dwelt as if myself were out,
My Body but within
Until a Might detected me
And set my Kernel in...
Emily Dickinson

Loretta Juras was born at home on Straight Shore Farm, which is on the Choptank River near Suicide Bridge, Cambridge, Maryland, in November 1927. Roman Catholicism and a Polish heritage were the bedrocks of the Juras family. Loretta was the sixth of seven children born to John and Lena Juras. Her siblings were Lillian, Florence, Marie, Theresa, Jean, and Leonard, the only brother. The children piled into a horse-drawn wagon to attend mass at Our Lady of Good Counsel Church in Secretary, Maryland.

Loretta spent her childhood with an overwhelming feeling of being lost, utterly alone, and abandoned. Her mother described her as a "nervous" child to explain the anxiety and panic attacks. As early as her eleventh year, Loretta would go off by herself and cling to a crucifix, while begging God to "take this cross away from me." Biologically-based clinical depression would be with her throughout her life.

Leaving home at sixteen with ten dollars and a small suitcase, Loretta took the bus to Baltimore, where she attended the Baltimore Business College and completed the two-year senior secretarial course in nine months. Her pastor spoke with her about entering a convent, and in August 1948, at the age of nineteen, she entered the Mother House of Glen Riddle Franciscans in Pennsylvania, with her youngest sister, Irene. They had both stayed for the two year novitiate only, when she was advised to return home by a psychiatrist and "wear off the habit." When they returned to Straight Shore Farm, Irene had a total breakdown and was sent to a psychiatric hospital. With the hundred dollars given to her when she left the convent, Loretta left for Wilmington after a couple of weeks. There she found work and began her search for healing. In less than a year, she "found an avocation in writing and producing the weekly radio program, Catholic Forum of the Air."

Hope was the antidote that brought temporary patches of peace in her life. She hand-fed this hope with music, art, travel, journaling, taking classes, group therapy, and, importantly, with work that gave her contact with people. She courageously sought out four psychiatrists, one psychoanalyst, and two spiritual directors. The poetry of Emily Dickinson gave her an intimate kinship with someone else who had the same struggle. Loretta also learned that Mother Theresa of Calcutta wrote of her problem with depression. St. Therese of Lisieux had bouts of depression before her death that often left her unable to pray. Sir Winston Churchill spoke of "the black dog" that followed him.

Despite the depression, Loretta never missed a day of work at St. Francis Hospital in Wilmington, from which she retired in 1990. She received a BA in History from the University of Delaware in 1966, graduating Phi Beta Kappa.

Loretta tried antidepressants when they came on the market in the 1980's. Until 1993, when Paxil arrived from Europe, she could not tolerate the drugs, Prozac being one of the worst for her. Paxil was not effective at first. After several months, the pharmacist included the prescription "insert." There she read: "Some patients require twice or three times the regular starting dose." After convincing her doctor to increase the dosage, three weeks later the depression lifted for the first time in her life.

In 1980 Loretta was professed in the Secular Franciscan Order. She has served six years as Minister of St. Patrick's Fraternity, five years as Treasurer, and two years as Formation Director. Backed by her own personal experience with spiritual direction, Loretta has been persistent that the Fraternity have the constant and loving care of a spiritual assistant.

For the past five years Loretta has found inspiration by spending an hour a week with a blind friend who is paralyzed from the neck down as a result of multiple sclerosis. Loretta says she "is as helpless as Christ was on the cross." Their time is spent with Loretta reading to her and feeding her black grapes or cantaloupe. Loretta also takes Holy Eucharist to hospital patients and conducts weekly song and prayer hours at a Franciscan nursing home.

Loretta has written of her struggle with depression in a book entitled, *Peace, the Finest Gift*. She continues to study and is struck that one in seven who have clinical depression will commit suicide. She invites anyone interested in talking or learning more about depression to phone her at 302-571-8503