

# A Eulogy for Seton Cove

By Joni Sager

Camelot thrived in Austin on Crawford Street for 25 years. My friend's Camelot metaphor is apt. The roundtable at the Seton Cove Spirituality Center set a place where people of all faiths could find solace, transformation and healing in their daily lives. Are we not all knights wandering in the forest in pursuit of our personal holy grail of meaning? The Cove lovingly prepared a feast to nourish and foster our spiritual growth and journey toward wholeness, adjunct to the work of individual churches.

The quarterly catalogues were the work of genius. Reading the 30-plus pages of offerings covering spiritual formation to contemplative retreats to creative encounters was such a joy. For 17 years, I was renewed and refreshed by the Cove's powerful programs and spiritual wisdom. Wayne Muller, a minister and leader from the Christian tradition, gave me permission to rest and observe the Sabbath. I learned how Fr. Richard Rohr's *Universal Christ* was reflected in the work of Hindu mystics. Rabbi Rami Shapiro developed my favorite rendition of the Buddhist lovingkindness meditation. I composed my personal Rule of Life modeled after *The Rule of St. Benedict*. I feel I have earned a master's degree in poetry from Cove class readings.

The free meditation groups (that grace has allowed to live on in cyberspace) are the gift that continues to rescue me. Eckhart Tolle's words are a salve to my soul: "Allow everything to be, within and without. Move deeply into the Now." Fr. Thomas Keating revived Christian contemplative practices with Centering Prayer, which asks you to focus on a holy word to connect with the stillness of God. I chose to participate in a Center Prayer group, but the Cove also offered three Zen groups. As Rev. Jim Rigby puts it, "None of us have a copyright on transcendence."

And transcendence was what was entrusted to me at our 9 a.m. Thursday gathering. Between our embraces of greeting and our embraces of farewell, the meditation room became buoyant with encouragement, respect and love. Never have I felt such a fiery connection with a circle of people. Our time in *lectio divina* exhilarated my mind. Our time in centering prayer lifted us all three feet into the air. I thought I would die without this weekly heavenly elixir.

Then the pandemic hit. Now it is Seton Cove that has died. A friend angrily cried out that the Ascension Healthcare behemoth killed the Cove for no reason. Taken literally, this is true. Seen in a different light, it is also not true. How can you kill a space dedicated to Sr. Jean Ann Wesselman's admonition, "Carry on the work of love"? Every participant in the Leadership Pilgrimage or a SoulCollage Open Studio or a Restoring Balance Luncheon has been passed the torch of love. The thousands of hearts enlightened by the Cove continue to shine.

Appreciating all the good the Cove accomplished does not appease our grief. I keenly regret the loss of the gallery space and outreach to artists. The art educator who managed the bimonthly shows invited my husband John to exhibit his work or juror a show at the Cove a half-dozen times. After she retired in 2018, the Cove asked for my help. Coordinating the gallery as a volunteer fulfilled a need I did not even know I had. Heaped on everything else, I mourn that Covid stole another worthwhile exhibit opportunity from artists.

Years ago when I was laid low by grief, a sage friend gave me this advice: Look to the day when the pain of loss will be overcome by gratitude that my loved one had been present in my life. I am slowing working on this. Consider what a miracle it was that the Cove existed at all.

In 1995, Sr. Mary Rose McPhee and a group of dedicated supporters founded this unique interfaith center under the umbrella of the Catholic-owned Seton Medical Center. The mission was to encourage people from all walks of life to grow spiritually with an open mind and heart: “Rooted in Judeo-Christian values and founded on the principles of St. Vincent de Paul that find God in the ordinary events of everyday life, the center reaches out to the poor in spirit and those seeking to enrich their relationship with God, self, others and all creation.”

What were the chances this endeavor would be incredibly successful for 25 years? The crux of the story: A Catholic hospital group supported a community-based spiritual outreach center that welcomed not only teachers from other Christian denominations, but also rabbis, Buddhist priests and Muslim imams — as well as poets, artists, authors, psychotherapists, life coaches, yoga teachers, integrative medicine practitioners, librarians and massage therapists. Each one of us who were awakened by one of their offerings can bear witness to the miracle of Seton Cove. As Jane Kenyon’s poem reminds us, “It could have been otherwise.”

The Cove was surely kissed by angels when Patty Speier became the superlative architect of our “A Place Apart.” Her extraordinary vision and divine talents along with her awesome staff created a haven of hospitality for pilgrims in search of a holistic approach to the workplace and to life. Fr. Thomas Merton praised practices that “penetrate beneath the surface of one’s life to get behind the façade we present to the

world, and bring out our inner spiritual freedom, our inmost truth.” Patty triumphed in developing programming that would have made Merton proud. Her remarkable compassion made her an ideal spiritual director, especially as mine.

As 2021 draws to a close, the sweet little castle and garden on Crawford Street stands abandoned. The last online classes were in March, and the building was cleared in August. Deprived of a goodbye by the Delta surge and corporate hubris, one could just stand outside the house and weep.

But recall the oft-quoted poem by Mary Elizabeth Frye: “Do not stand at my grave and weep / I am not there. I do not sleep... / When you awaken in the morning’s hush / I am the swift uplifting rush / Of quiet birds in circled flight. / I am the soft stars that shine at night...”

We must hear these words again from Mary Oliver:

*To live in this world  
you must be able  
to do three things:  
to love what is mortal;  
to hold it against your bones  
knowing your own life depends on it;  
and, when the time comes to let it go,  
to let it go.*

Take a measure of comfort in knowing we appreciated what we had. As another friend expressed it, “I will always LOVE SETON COVE. I will always be GRATEFUL FOR SETON COVE. And I will always MISS SETON COVE.”

*Benjamin Franklin famously said, “In this world, nothing is certain except death and taxes.”*

*To this I would add the certainty Texas state agency low-bid pens will be unkind — either not even attempting to write or hard-heartedly leaking.*

*Everyone at my last agency lined up to attend the annual Government Technology Conference — not because of an interest in the topic, but because the vendors gave out nice pens. We would stock up for the year.*

*I had a secret stash of treasured pens. Seton Cove provided seminar participants with smooth and dependable ones that caress your hand as you gather your thoughts.*

*After the Cove closed, I researched how to secure my own supply, only to find Staples is discontinuing the line. The only way to preserve them was to send out as many as possible. So Merry Christmas from me.*

*As one of my meditation friends paraphrases Hsu Yun, “May your ink well contain an exquisite truth.”*