

## University of Dayton eCommons

---

Marianist Award Lectures

U.S. Catholic Special Collection

---

1999

# Memoirs and Meaning

Jill Ker Conway

Follow this and additional works at: [http://ecommons.udayton.edu/uscc\\_marianist\\_award](http://ecommons.udayton.edu/uscc_marianist_award)

---

### Recommended Citation

Conway, Jill Ker, "Memoirs and Meaning" (1999). *Marianist Award Lectures*. 9.  
[http://ecommons.udayton.edu/uscc\\_marianist\\_award/9](http://ecommons.udayton.edu/uscc_marianist_award/9)

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the U.S. Catholic Special Collection at eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Marianist Award Lectures by an authorized administrator of eCommons. For more information, please contact [frice1@udayton.edu](mailto:frice1@udayton.edu), [mschlengen1@udayton.edu](mailto:mschlengen1@udayton.edu).

Jill Ker Conway

---

*Marianist Award Lecture/1999*

# Memoirs and Meaning



TEMP  
GR. STOR  
US. CATH  
CT  
25  
.C68  
1999

MEMOIRS AND MEANING

by JILL KER CONWAY

Marianist Award Lecture  
1999

THE UNIVERSITY OF DAYTON

Copyright © 1999 by The University of Dayton

---

JILL KER CONWAY was born in Hillston, New South Wales. She is a graduate of the University of Sidney in History and English and received her doctoral degree from Harvard University.

Dr. Conway served as Vice President for Internal Affairs at the University of Toronto from 1973 to 1975. In 1975, she became the first woman president of Smith College. Since 1985, she has been a Visiting Scholar and Professor in the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's program in Science, Technology and Society.

Dr. Conway's publications include:

*When Memory Speaks, 1998*

*Written By Herself Volume 2, 1996 (ed.)*

*True North, 1994*

*The Politics of Women's Education, 1993 (ed.)*

*Written By Herself, 1992 (ed.)*

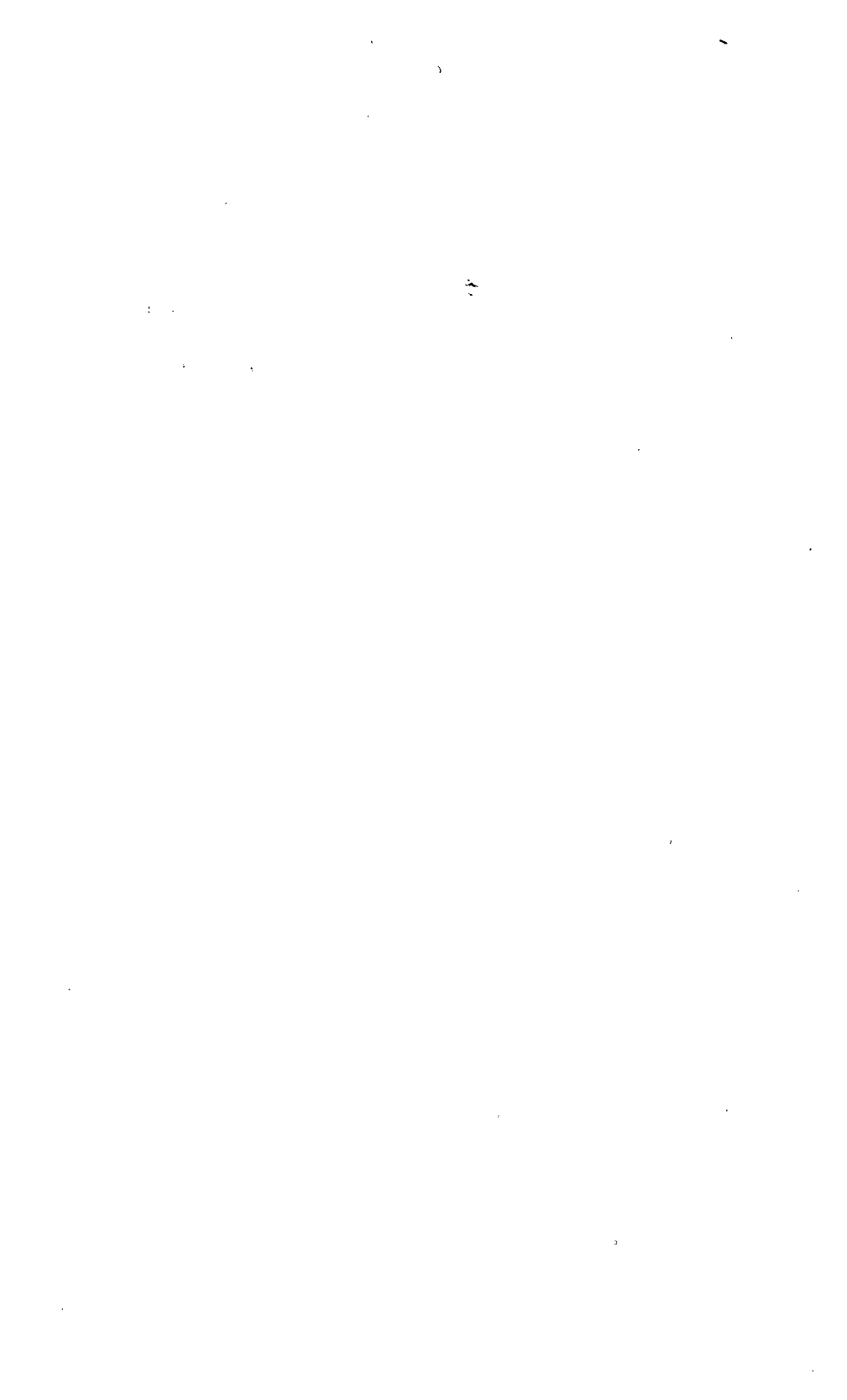
*The Road from Coorain, 1989*

*Learning About Women, 1989 (ed.)*

*The First Generation of American Women Graduates, 1987*

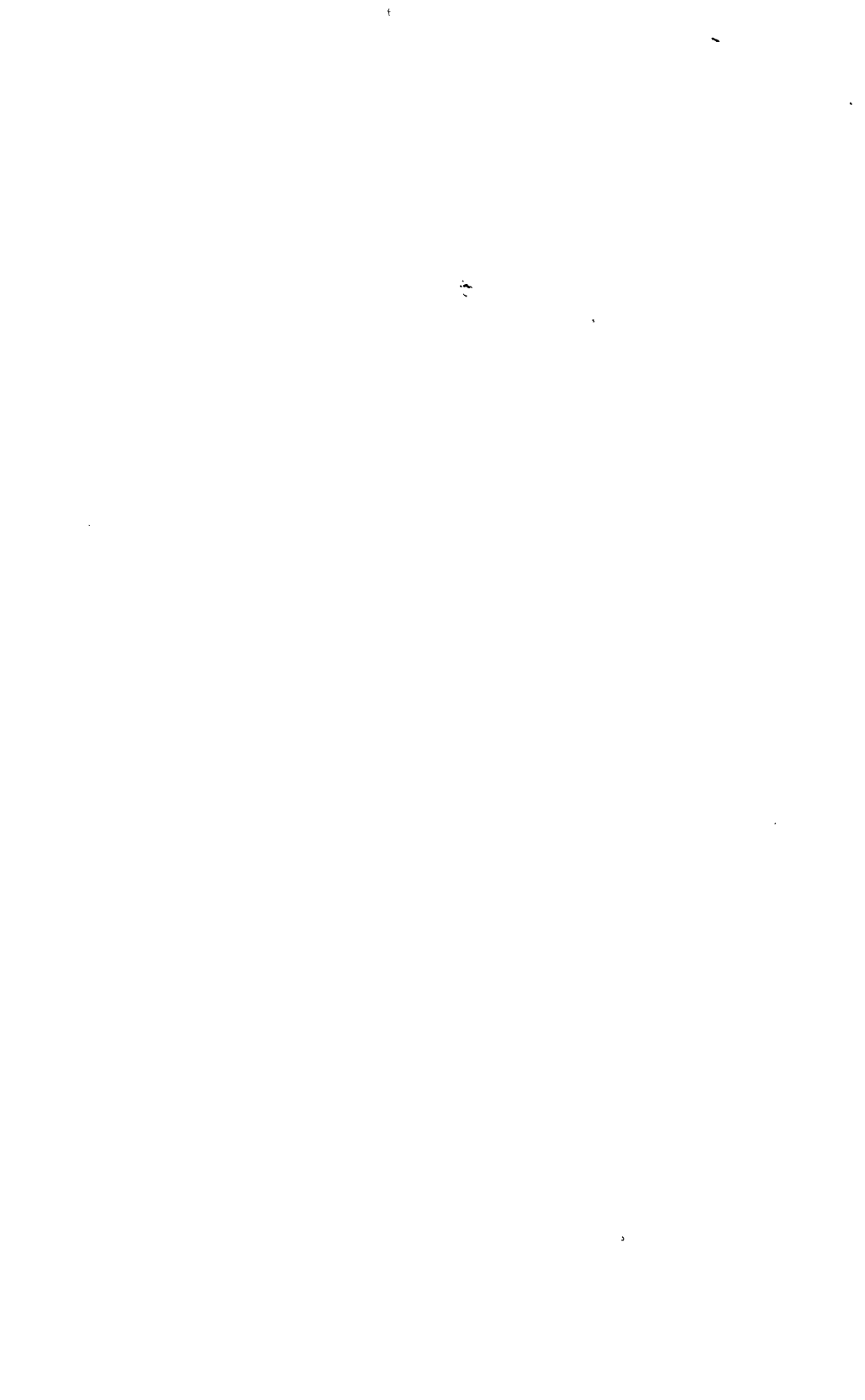
*The Female Experience in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century America: A Guide to the History of American Women, 1982*

In addition to these publications, Dr. Conway has authored numerous articles in scholarly journals.



---

*The following lecture was given at the University of Dayton on the occasion of the presentation of the Marianist Award to Jill Ker Conway, March 24, 1999.*





---

## Memoirs and Meaning

It's a great pleasure and privilege to be here today on this marvelous occasion. I'm particularly grateful for the invitation I received because it asked me to reflect a little bit on the way my religious faith as a Catholic had affected my scholarly life. I had thought about that on and off at different points in my career, but I had never given it sustained attention. So, I am very grateful for the request to do so today.

The introduction has mentioned the fact that I grew up in a very remote part of rural Australia. It is about 500 miles west of Sidney; population density 1 in 20 square miles; annual rainfall less than 10 inches per year; it is a semi-arid desert country. I happened to be born in 1934; I was five when the Second World War broke out. By that time, my brothers had gone away to boarding school, and all the able-bodied men in all of Australia, but particularly rural Australia, volunteered to join the Army instantly in 1939. Our sheep station which had 2½ – 3 people to work on it, suddenly had no male helpers at all. It was just my father, my mother and me, and I worked on the place. My mother had concluded correctly that I didn't need to do school more than one afternoon a week, so the rest of the time I worked. Much of that time was spent alone because herding sheep and cattle is a pretty solitary business, and you ride great distances on horseback. The animals are tired or poorly nourished, so you can't even ride a horse. You have to get off and walk behind them while moving them around. So, I spent many, many days alone herding animals, rather an Old Testament kind of occupation, really, in total isolation without the sound of another human voice and very little sound of other creatures because most Australian songbirds are pretty silent. Really, for lack of anything better to do, faced with this extraordinary expanse of nature and very marginal

---

human beings, much of my early childhood was spent thinking about the relationship of human beings to nature.

The question could not possibly keep from popping up because Australian Aboriginal Tribes would go by, moving over our land. What are we doing here? What is this bunch of white people doing here in such isolation? Why am I here, and what am I supposed to be doing? That's not a speculation that I think comes quickly or early to children in a man-made environment, because there are people all around, it seems to have been created for you to be part of. So, you don't ask that kind of question, but amongst my earliest memories are those questions. Of course, they are theological questions and part of the grounding of a religious sensibility or I could not have described them that way as a child. Of course, as I watched the gregaries of nature in this very remote, semi-arid country, the arrival of drought and other natural disasters, I couldn't help speculating on the whole question of free will and determinism. Because here were my parents trying to raise sheep and cattle on this very marginal land and every now and again some great event in nature would wipe out the entire effort. I began to wonder, really, how much freedom we did have to negotiate this world. So, at a very early age, those were two powerful interests, and they shaped how I read and what I thought about. Remember, no institutional church, no church within 150 miles of any denomination, no Sunday worship; just the Bible to read and parents—my father who was devout, but had no way of showing it. So, one's religious life was unformed by institutions—very interesting, nothing to object to, nothing to be outraged about, it wasn't there. That, I think, also is a shaping aspect of my early life.

Certainly, when I got away to secondary school and in my early years in college, and when I began to read classical philosophy and to understand the Greek world, the whole concept of *philos*, the end toward which a life was tending, was absolutely mesmerizing to me. As I think about it now, at a much different place in my life, I can see that this Greek view was enormously attractive in relation to the kind of society, or absence of it, that I had grown up in. It gave me an interesting biography. When I got to graduate school at

---

Harvard, I chose as a dissertation topic, the subject of *the First Generation of American Women who gained access to graduate education in this country*. They were born in about 1860; died around 1935. They were the founders of all professions for women, i.e., social work, nursing, librarianship, etc. They were also great social reformers, and many of them were shaping figures in the progressive era in this country. Because they all had graduate education, mostly by going to Europe, there were very few American institutions they could study at, one being Cornell. The opportunity to go to Sage College made it possible for women to do graduate work there; but in Science and in most of the social sciences, they had to go to Europe. They had a sense of having really been chosen by history as the first to do these remarkable intellectual exercises.

M. Carey Thomas, founder of Bryn Mawr, of course, is one of them; Jane Adams, founder of Helms House and creator of Professional Social Work, another; Florence Kelly, first translator of Marks and Engles into English in this country, an absolutely dynamic social reformer and worker for industrial safety; Alice Hamilton, founder of the Profession of Industrial Medicine—all born about the same time, all knew one another, all wrote to one another, all kept diaries. They were all for things which were absolutely “riveting” to me as a graduate student. They were ambitious and, openly so, they talked about it to one another. They were politically “savvy”; they understood about power and politics and wanted to use the system. No matter that they couldn’t vote, it did not bother them—they were going to make it work however they needed it too. Ambitious; interested in power for good purposes; intensely intellectual; very strong abstract thinkers; and all of them, in one way or another, interested in understanding what it meant to be female in a world that they saw being absolutely transformed, first by the impact of the Civil War and then by the arrival of a very rapid rate of industrialization. So, they had personal qualities that were just “riveting” for me. I was ambitious and was never allowed to state it. So it was wonderful to meet these women interested in politics, wonderful to encounter this earlier generation who were perfectly happy to go to Washington to lobby and find their way around

---

Capitol Hill. Who cared whether they voted or not; they knew how to organize. They were passionate about abstract thought, really committed intellectuals. So, in writing my dissertation about them, I studied their lives in great detail. They all wrote memoirs and left behind diaries; and because they had a sense of being creators of history, they also saved every scrap of paper. I have never seen such files of news clippings as those women kept. I came to know them, as any good historical researcher does in working on a biography, better than their contemporaries would have and almost better than they knew themselves. When you get to see a life in terms of what a person writes in their letters, diaries, what their critics write about them, how they appear in the press, and how different generations respond to them, you see them in the round in a way that is not possible for anybody else. All of the things that attracted me to them were very clear in their personal correspondence with one another. When they were launching a campaign to outlaw child labor, they would write to one another and talk about: "who looks best in photographs for the press?—okay, we'll have Florence Kelly make the announcement; you know she's going to launch the campaign, she looks better"; "Who's the best lobbyist?—she'll go to Washington"; and who's the best fund-raiser?—she'll do 'X'." They were very clear and instrumental about themselves and what they were doing. They had great celebrations when they won something, like the banning of child labor, or pensions for widows, and so forth. They would get together and have a great party, celebrating what they had achieved.

I looked forward very much to reading their memoirs, because I thought this was going to be really inspiring. Well, when they came to tell their lives' stories, they suppressed all of the ambition, all of the interest in power and politics, all of the straight instrumental notion of who was good at what, and they told their stories as though they were the nicest, sweetest, most gentle ladies to whom a whole lot of stuff had happened; no indication that they had made it happen. They would just have you thinking that they were just "standing around" and that the child labor movement kind of "thumped up" against them, other than they created it. I can give

---

you a very good example of interest to the people in the audience who think about linguistics. When Adams founded Helms House, she did it after a lengthy stay in Europe, during which she studied every community for women she could visit, Ersoline and Benedict, and convents, utopian socialist communities outside Paris, Toynbee Hall in London, which was a great Reform community (she went and lived there for three months, to understand it). Then she wrote a series of letters home to her favorite sister, outlining what she had learned from all that and how she was going to apply it in creating this new kind of institution in the city of Chicago, which was to be a place where educated young women could go and live to be good neighbors to the newly arrived immigrant population of the city. The motive for doing that came from Adams' father's relationship to Abraham Lincoln. Adams' father had worked to bring about Lincoln's election in the State of Illinois and then had worked on the campaign that got him the nomination for the presidency. When Lincoln died, the family treated him almost like a Catholic "saint"; on the anniversary of his assassination, they sat down and read his speeches. They thought about his life, and they reflected on the meaning of that life. So, Adams had internalized the notion that she too, to carry on that tradition, had to do something great for social justice. The years she spent traveling in Europe after she finished college, which were years right after the Paris commune and great industrial strife in Europe, led her to think that the same thing might happen in the United States, especially so if the newly arrived immigrant population was not received well and was exploited economically. So the idea of founding a house for educated young women to live in and serve the neighborhood in the industrial slums of Chicago was the idea of "bridging the gap" between the new arrivals and what Adams thought of as native Americans, meaning people born in the United States. So she had, as her mission, to try and prevent class divisions appearing in American Democracy; and to do that, she had to come up with a new theory of democracy. Most of her writing, as an adult, was about the dimensions of a democratic society if one moved beyond a simple rural republic to an urban industrial one. She was a woman of extraordinary intellec-

---

tual power. She was a friend of John Duey and a friend of Thorston Theblin; they both used to eat dinner at Helms House regularly, and joined in teaching classes there.

The thing that troubled me about the way Adams and her friends represented themselves was the following: Adams had taken that period of study, thought a lot; read a lot; if you look at her library and see the works of European social thought that she read (she read in French, German, and Italian, and marked out the margins—she's no slouch, intellectually). When she came to write her autobiography, instead of referring to all that study, analysis, and thought, she says (and I am quoting), "*it would be hard to say when the idea of founding Helms House came into my mind*" (she didn't think of it, it just came in somehow); "*but if it did*" (so it is conditional that she ever even thought about it), "*it came when I was taken*" (which is passive), "*by a philanthropic worker, to see the poor in the streets of London, in the East End, scrabbling for food in the gutter*" (after Saturday market had closed there was no Sunday trading, so they threw out the remaining food in the gutter). She says, "*at that moment she had a moment of conversion and knew she must go home to America and stop this from happening there.*" Well, that's great except that if you look at her diary for the days in question she says, "*I've been trying to persuade Ms. Jones to take me to see the market, and I'm very disappointed and angry with her because she has not taken me yet.*" So she made happen the very event that she says was the accidental moment of her conversion experience. What she has done by using that language is to tell you she didn't think about it. Forget about the four or five years of reading European social thought. She didn't have any analysis of the problem, she had this emotional response when she saw people scrabbling for food in the gutter.

I subsequently learned that in reading Adams' writing, every time she uses the passive voice, she is really acting decisively. So, she dresses up as fate or destiny the ambitions that took her to a particular place, and she pushes all the action in her narrative as far away from herself as she can.

---

I subsequently discovered through lengthy reading of women's memoirs, not their diaries, but their memoirs, that they do it all the time. So, given a close reading of a text by a woman, look for the passive voice, and watch out for it, because it is usually when she is doing something decisive.

What really interested me about these women was, that in terms that I would think of as a Christian, they had a very strong sense of vocation, and no language to speak about it. They couldn't break the gender stereotypes of their day to acknowledge their ambition or their drive because they would not have been accepted. Unless you think Adams is just an example, let me cite Margaret Sanger, who is a great founder of the movement for birth control in this country. Sanger's mother had fourteen pregnancies. Sanger was convinced that her mother died of tuberculosis, aggravated by those repeated pregnancies, and she made a pledge as a very young woman that she would work on finding ways to get women some means to control their fertility. When she trained as a nurse and started out her career in New York City early in this century, she made her obstetrics practice in the lower east side of Manhattan. She wanted to collect case records showing how repeated pregnancies and poor nutrition damaged the health of immigrant women. In order to build her practice, she had flyers printed that said "*Margaret A. Sanger, Obstetrics Nurse, Available for Deliveries, at such and such an address*"; she had them posted all around the lower east side of Manhattan, so naturally she began to get calls to go and perform deliveries there. But, does she acknowledge that in her autobiography? No, not at all. She says, "*I did not really like working in the lower east side. Poverty was not attractive, but more and more of my calls began to come from the lower east side of Manhattan*" (just began to come, nothing about what made them begin), "*as though I were being pulled there by a destiny beyond my control*," (so, she has made happen what pulls her there, but she attributes it to "destiny," some force outside herself).

I began to think about this as a teacher of young women and young men and spent a little time also looking at the way a male

---

life is represented. Of course, it is represented in a very different way because men are supposed to be ambitious, it is admirable to plan for one's future—planning is called scheming in a woman, but it is admirable in a man. They are able to lay out a plan of how they thought that they might live their lives. It is never completely carried out because we are not in charge of our own fate, but they can still talk about purposeful actions toward an end and acknowledge what they did to help bring it about. If you question me, just read Lee Iacocca on the Chrysler Corporation, or Henry Ford on the creation of Ford Motor Co., or Jim Watson on discovering DNA. They are all very clear accounts and very strong authoritative voices of “what I did” to bring this about. If I'm counseling a young man of talent and ability, I can pull out any number of these autobiographies, and they will exaggerate the agency of the narrator and make him seem a bit more responsible for his destiny than he really is. Nonetheless, it will look like a blueprint of how you go about this business of moving into adult life and finding an occupation. If I give a young woman, i.e., Adams, Sanger, or any of her peers—what those stories basically say is, “hang around, kid, and somehow or other fate will bump up against you; and it will show you what you should do in life.” So, it is very de-motivating for a young woman. So, I began to think about how we decide how a male or female life should be represented, and how the conventions develop which say what you can tell and what you can report.

In my own life, writing my own memoirs, I have worked constantly to shatter all the rules about what you can say, what you can talk about, what you can acknowledge, in order to present a totally different kind of life thought. If I return, for a moment, to the question of vocation and calling, one of the things that I think is so crucial in teaching is that one sees a young life—somebody who is 18 to 22 in front of you in the classroom; and there is all this cluster of talents and emotions, and they are not yet shaped or formed, maybe shaped by convention or peer pressure, but it is a “golden” moment, that transition from late adolescence to young adulthood—at a time when the person is most “open” to try to think clearly and in a moral sense about what the meaning of the talents they may



---

possess is. I think a good education works well when it is a process by which the student's deepest emotions, which are their most powerful source of moral energy, are fused together with intellectual talent and the two come together in a capacity for action. The teaching of somebody in that age group, or a graduate student later, is in a sense, an aesthetic exercise. You are looking at the student trying to capture the ideal type, trying to grasp what the t-loss of that young life is and finding the buttons to press or the keys to turn that will get all that energy and intellect and ability harnessed in a creative way. Now, of course, one can think about that in a Greek sense, as many of us do, because the Greeks were such powerful educational philosophers. Or, one can think about the Christian version of it, and that, of course, is the notion of the "calling," and that is the action on the part of God to call a person to exercise some special function or to do some special work. The vocation or calling comes out of being able to listen to God's call. So, much of my interest in the whole subject of biography and autobiography comes from trying to understand what happens in a life. How are people able to "hear" and register that "call," because it is not a voice, it is not anything, i.e., if we were medieval people, we might say we heard God speak to us, or God came to us in a vision. But, for most of us, the question is what goes on in a human psyche developmentally so that the message is registered and the talents get harnessed. Of course, we can think of a "calling" also in a sense that God has called to us all in a quest for salvation, a process of seeking "union with God," which is also something we are "called to." But, the "calling to work" is what we teachers work with most. Not that we don't deal with "calling to love." Freud was right that love and work are the two deepest and most profound structures of human personality. But as teachers, we usually try to stick to the work side of things—for good reasons.

I think the great Protestant reformers of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were correct in seeing work as a form of worship; or as "mom psychiatry" would call it, one of the deepest structures of the human personality through which we live out what it is to be "human." If, and only if, we find "the calling" because we make the

---

choice out of material considerations, out of convention, going with the crowd, in a way that is in no sense related to our deepest emotions, or the possible expression of our talents, we are lost as human beings and the experience of work is alienating. But, if you find the way to link those deepest, most profound emotional issues and concerns with intellectual and personal talents, then there is no question of work being alienating; it is enormously fulfilling.

In my scholarly work, I have been interested, you might say obsessed (might be a better word), with a question of how we are able to “hear the call” and when and in what stage of life that capacity is developed. It often comes late in life; doesn’t necessarily come in one’s young adulthood. If God does not speak with us literally as a “voice,” the message comes in our own inner non-verbal conversations with ourselves because we all have this image-less thought, which is our own inner communication. It goes on all the time, and it is something that we can analyze but we can’t shape. It goes on independently of our rational, critical self.

I have been interested in autobiography to understand people’s accounts of how a life does take shape. Where do the talents emerge? How do they intercept with the cause? How much does the person make the cause happen, like my example of Jane Adams or Margaret Sanger? It wasn’t there waiting for them; they made it. It was the cause that they really were called to follow. And for all the sophistication of contemporary psychiatry (and I am probably going to annoy some members of the audience in the cognitive sciences), we have very few answers to that question except through personal merit.

That is why I am so interested in the drama of autobiography. There are many issues with the drama. It is a kind of a hybrid form. It is fiction, but yet it is not fiction in the sense that you cannot tell everything that happened to yourself. You have to create a plot and select and organize experiences; so it is fictional in that sense. Somebody else would tell it differently, or you would tell it differently in another stage in your own life because you are always rating it up to a point in the present. Yet, it is not fiction because it is about real

---

people, real events, real places, and things that actually happened. In that sense, some part of the plot is given and, many literary critics think of therefore, as a kind of “bastard” form of fiction because it came not out of the wholly imagined in the created world, it is derivative from experience. It has all sorts of problems, of course, because constructing a narrative in which you are both the narrator and the object of the story is a very complicated task. It requires great literary ingenuity to “pull it off.” Telling it “well” requires both using what people will expect the conventional narrative to be and twisting it around to shock them into seeing that the story is, in fact, different. That is something of a trick, and something detective stories do all of the time, so you can learn a lot from them.

There are very profound gender differences in the way people tell stories, and I referred to them earlier. Let me say that in the twentieth century, the male odyssey, which is derived from Greek epic, has been constantly amended by the experience of modern warfare. It is no longer possible to think about yourself as the epic hero in all the great mass slaughter of twentieth century war. So, that male life story is being edited and that plot changed in many ways. It may still be a quest narrative but no longer Odysseus, act to conquer. Women’s life stories are being edited to change the romantic life plot. We all know the plots of operas, which are the ultimate production of “absurdum” of romantic life stories for women. Everybody knows the standard nineteenth century opera plot. The soprano is meant to be young and beautiful and emotionally very finely tuned, no brains whatsoever—under the control of scheming relatives or wicked plotters of some kind or another; and she “bumps” into the tenor in the first act, by accident; and he is, of course, engaged in war or revolution or some very decisive action. They sing some absolutely glorious love duets; and then, in the second act they are parted—scheming relatives, war, revolution, disaster of one kind or another—and they sing a lot of solos about how much they miss one another. In the third act, they are reunited, and they sing some more glorious love duets. Then she

---

“drops dead” on the stage—she’s either died of tuberculosis, or she’s been poisoned, or she commits suicide, like Lucia Lammemore, or like Tosca. You know Tosca is “gutsy” enough to kill the tyrant; but when she finds her lover is dead, she kills herself.

Now, what that plot form says is, a woman’s life is over when she meets the tenor—the story ends then; the tenor’s story goes on but hers is over. The standard life plot for female self presentation was almost always in that form, and it ended, and so *“I married him”* and/or *“we lived happily ever after.”* We all know that is nonsense. People don’t live happily ever after; they have fights and quarrels. Life is difficult and much goes on, but that has been the conventional ending. Really, it is only very recently, in the feminist movement of the 1970’s, that the female life plot has been changed. The story is not any longer told in terms of the tenor, he may be an incidental character, and an important one, but its clear that is not what the story is about. There are many people who slip back into the earlier form, and those of you who enjoy reading autobiographies should read Catherine Graham’s personal history. Here is a woman who was a most powerful woman in Washington for three or more decades and rescued a failing newspaper empire from a scheming husband. She took the decision to publish the Pentagon Papers and supported the reporters who broke the “Watergate” story. However, she presents herself as this “little, nervous housewife” who just hardly knew what a newspaper was about, always being instructed by male advisors, lawyers, editors. When she’s taking a strong position, she says *“I heard myself saying.”* You can’t get much further from making a decision than that. So, that strand of the story continues, but women, on the whole, are reconstructing. I think that men’s and women’s narratives are coming considerably closer together in the later part of the twentieth century.

There are a number of current trends that I think need a little bit of analysis and speculation. Autobiography is now the most popular form of fiction. It is read more than the novel in all of the English speaking world and in translation in countries like Japan. Why is that? My mother and my grandparents read realistic fiction. They

---

loved Tolstoy and Dickens and Zola. They thought that was a reflection of reality; and they took moral guidance and instruction from it. But I think we have been so instructed by psycho-analytic criticism that we don't see realistic fiction, we see the fantasies of very creative intellects. So almost the only form that people will suspend this belief for, if it is well written, is the John Revoir Autobiography because it is true. It may not be everybody's truth, but it is one person's truth, as close as they can get to telling it, if it is well done. There is a tremendous interest in autobiography for that reason.

Secondly, I think it is hard to write an autobiography without entering into all the great questions of humanistic disciplines: Do we have free will? Where do my emotions come from? How do I develop morality? Is there an understandable relationship between the individual and society? How are we determined and in what ways are we not? Where does evil come from? Where does criminality come from? And so on. A reader who wants to reflect about that, and I think that most all general readers do, hasn't got anywhere else much to go at the moment. A few generations back you could read Vernon Russell or William James; they wrote philosophy and psychology in perfectly plain standard English. Those disciplines now have very technical languages, which a non-specialist cannot enter very easily. The same is true of history and literary criticism, and so forth. So that, in a way, people are being pushed back to this one kind of narrative to think about their lives, because it is an automatic prompt to think about one's own life, to read a well-written autobiography. Of course, we also live in a society and culture that is shaped by the cult of the celebrity, and so we have everybody blurting out the most intimate details of their private life on talk shows and television, and so forth, so the celebrity memoir is a big, best seller. The shocking account of sexual abuse, or something equally scandalous, is a big, best seller. In many ways, I think we can see autobiographies like Catherine Harris' *"The Kiss,"* which is the story about an incestuous relationship between a father and daughter, which some twenty years ago would have been a novel. But the boundaries between what one can now talk about have

---

shifted, so you can now write it in the first person—so the subject matter is shifting a little, but nonetheless, there are a variety of cultural forces pushing people toward this literary drama. Now, if one thinks about telling a story in which one's narrator is also the subject of the story—so you are the subject and object of the same sentence—what is going on when you do that? There is a wonderful phrase from a literary critic named George Guistoff, who first got us all thinking about autobiographies in the 1950's. He says when one is writing an autobiography, one is experiencing "the knowing of knowing", where subject and object overlap each other. The "knowing of knowing," I associate with God; I don't think of that as human, so that I think one has to ask oneself, what kind of story are people really striving to tell, if they work honestly with this drama. In a way, I think we can think of them in another phrase from Guistoff, as "scriptures of the self"; and in that sense, "they are not too different from the Old Testament prophets." Because in a way, what one is trying to do is take the ebb and flow and chaos of experience, pull the meaning out of it, and render an account of a life; kind of an accounting to some other authority—certainly, not just for oneself. Whenever I think about that, of course, I think about Job because there is really no greater marvel for telling a life story as honestly as one can. I am thinking about the *Book of Job*, *Job 13: 13-15, 17-20, 22 (New Oxford)*: "Let me have silence, and I will speak, and let come on me what may. I will take my flesh in my teeth, and put my life in my hands. Behold, he will slay me; I have no hope; yet I will defend my ways to his face. Listen carefully to my words, and let my declaration be in your ears. Behold, I have prepared my case; I know that I shall be vindicated. Who is there that will contend with me? For then I would be silent and die. Only grant two things to me, then I will not hide myself from thy Face. Then call, and I will answer; or let me speak, and do thou reply to me."

So, in many senses, I think that an autobiographer does just that—"*I will take my flesh in my teeth, and put my life in your hands.*" That is a great way to think about personal narrative in our society. Most people don't read the Bible. Most people don't know great

---

narrative texts like that. They are hungry for them, and that's the reason they have this intense desire to read personal narratives that try to extract a meaning that is psychologically true, historically true, and emotionally true, and to do that is to do what a great novelist does. But it is also to enter into an examination of a life in a way that we have a powerful religious tradition for undertaking. In a highly secular society, I think the only way people do that today is through the study of personal narrative and that is one reason why it concerns us so much. In many ways, one can think of writing a memoir as a religious act, but also an effort to create some kind of community that is based on honest sharing of experience. We have all read fake memoirs, or self-serving ones, or silly celebrity ones, which don't do that—a well written one does that.

That's why we find the drama so gripping today, and why we've moved a little away from seeking instruction from the standard form of the novel. Because we can speak today about almost any experience, and that was not the case in the past. So it was the novel that led us into some of the darkest places of the human psyche, but people feel free to talk about them now. Many critics decry that, but I do not. I think it is a good development.

Now, I thought I would finish up by just reading to you a passage from my last book, which is called *"When Memory Speaks,"* because it is a reflection on how important memory is for us.

*"Until we lose it, we take memory for granted. Along with language, it is the force that makes us human. It gives us the cultural context for the miraculous power of communication. Memory was "Murazanee" for the Greeks; and "Mirnerva, with her Owl" for the Romans; a powerful "goddess" with a munificent face. We need to cultivate her because it matters how we remember things. If we remember the past as a series of chaotic events governed by an impersonal and non-moral fate, or lack, we create a similar kind of future in our mind's eye, and that prophecy is usually self-fulfilling. If we see the past as fully determined by economic forces, by genetic codes, even by birth order and relationship to parents, we see ourselves as victims of those forces with our best hope a kind of stoic*

---

*resignation. If we see our past as a moral and spiritual "journey" in time, our imagined future will continue that quest. We might not use the imagery of named Julian of Norwich, but we will be in the same egostential position as she was, pondering the intersection of our tiny point of human consciousness with the metaphysical patent she called the "mind of God." We travel through life guided by an inner-plot; part the creation of family; part the internalization of thought or social "norms"; part the function of our imaginations and our own capacity for insight into ourselves; part from our groping to understand the Universe—in which, the Planet we inhabit is a speck. When we speak about our memories, we do so through literary forms that seem to capture universals and human experience—the quest; the romance; the odyssey, the tragic or the comic mode. Yet, we are all unique and so are our stories. We should pay close attention to our stories, polish their imagery, find their positive rather than their negative form. Search for the ways we experience life differently from the inherited version and edit the plot accordingly, keeping our eyes on the philosophical implications of the changes we make. Was this action free? Was that one determined? How does the intersection of the two change the trajectory of a life? If you think about studying your memory as a text and editing it and shaping it so that you get the most positive form of your life plot, you are taking charge of yourself in a way you cannot do through any other kind of self-scrutiny."*



---

## **THE MARIANIST AWARD**

The Marianist Award derives its name from the title familiarly given to members of the religious order founded by William Joseph Chaminade and Adèle de Batz de Trenquelléon.

Established in 1950, the Marianist Award was originally presented to men and women who had made outstanding contributions to Mariology in America. In 1967, the concept for the award was broadened to honor individuals who had made outstanding contributions to humanity.

The Marianist Award was revived in 1986 when the University of Dayton announced that it would again present the award annually, this time to honor a Roman Catholic whose work has contributed a positive and distinguishing mark in the intellectual life.

The award includes a stipend of \$5,000.

---

RECIPIENTS OF  
THE MARIANIST AWARD

1950	Juniper Carol, O.F.M.
1951	Daniel A. Lord, S.J.
1952	Patrick Peyton C.S.C.
1953	Roger Brien
1954	Emil Neubert
1955	Joseph A. Skelly
1956	Frank Duff
1957	JohnMcShain Eugene F. Kennedy, Jr.
1958	Winifred A. Feely
1959	Bishop John F. Noll
1960	Eamon R. Carroll, O. Carm.
1961	Coley Taylor
1963	René Laurentin
1964	Philip C. Hoelle, S.M.
1965	Cyril O. Vollert, S.J.
1967	Eduardo Frei-Montalva
1986	John Tracy Ellis
1987	Rosemary Haughton
1988	Timothy O'Meara
1989	Walter J. Ong, S.J.
1990	Sidney Callahan
1991	John T. Noonan, Jr.
1992	Louis Dupré
1993	Monika Hellwig
1994	Philip Gleason
1995	J. Bryan Hehir
1996	Charles Taylor
1997	Gustavo Gutiérrez
1998	David W. Tracy
1999	Jill Ker Conway