

This paper was written for the class “Personal Formation and Development” with [Mark Buchanan](#) at [Ambrose Seminary](#). It’s a reflection on Mary, Mother of Jesus and it takes the form of a personal letter to Mark. I hope it sparks some questions and musings of your own and that it gives you new permission to reconsider things as I reflect on my changing understanding of her.

December 2021

High River, Alberta

Dear Mark,

Well, this is about the 15th draft of this letter, (some made it onto paper,) but I, for better or worse, will send this one. Mary has surfaced many things in me and I’m already afraid that I won’t be able to communicate all that’s been ruminating efficiently, clearly, but I’ll try.

I’m undoing so much these days, things about the church, the world, the scriptures. You started this process and I’m grateful because taking communion has now become a place of life and grace rather than a place of judgment and dread. At times this undoing feels hopeful and life-giving. At times I’m so full of anger and lament that I’m driven to cry and rant and rage. (my poor family!)

Happily for you, I’m typing this letter. My handwriting is remarkably inconsistent, sometimes beautiful, sometimes hopeless and scrawling. I long for attractive penmanship but alas and alack, that’s not me. One of my many faults. In *A Wrinkle in Time*, a favorite book of mine, Mrs. Whatsit says: “Meg, I give you your faults.” “My faults!” Meg cried. “Your faults.” “But I’m always trying to get rid of my faults!” “Yes,” Mrs. Whatsit said. “However, I think you’ll find they’ll come in very handy on Camazotz.”¹

¹ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/863454-meg-i-give-you-your-faults-my-faults-meg-cried> (retrieved Dec. 3, 2021)

As a child reader this heartened me tremendously. That ‘faults’, the reality of who we actually are, can be and are useful. [Corrie ten Boom](#) ministered in and through and in spite of her faults. There is room at the table for everyone (this also came from you Mark). I loved the song that was a part of your [NewStory](#) Launch video -- *Wide is the Welcome* I think it was called. It echoes my heart’s cry. I’ve been looking for a legitimate seat at the table most of my Christian life. That’s the first thing that I’ve been undoing. That me, the person God created, is the one He actually likes. The *Gift of Being Yourself*, Steve Macchia’s book, has been a great help in this. Gaining a deeper understanding of Mary’s humanity has been a balm.

Fritz Mascher (the father of my friend Fay who is listening in on the class and loving it) told Fay last week to tell me: “Colleen should listen to Ave Maria, by Schubert”, so that’s what I’ve got playing in the background as I write to you. Don’t you agree that if someone north of 90 tells you to do something you should do it? So, in honor of Mr. Mascher I’ll begin with Mary in music.

In the two Mary songs most familiar to me, *Ave Maria*² and *Mary Did You Know?*³ Mary is portrayed in two ways and sadly she is either too much or too little. Catholics give her too much credit don’t they, Protestants not enough. Either she’s the perfect intercessor saint or silent and clueless--and neither of these positions are strictly true. I probably won’t stop loving both these songs though (not sure how to reconcile that).

Research for academic papers has long been overwhelming to me. You’d think being married to the [Dean](#) would help and it does, a little, but alas I’m a poet first and doing things in a diligent linear particular fashion isn’t exactly in my wheelhouse.

In a recent class with [Dr. Tremper Longman](#), we were encouraged to think of reading commentaries as being in conversation with the authors. This helped. I’ve loved

² <https://www.classical-music.com/features/articles/ave-maria-lyrics/> (retrieved December 1, 2021)

³ <https://www.musixmatch.com/lyrics/Pentatonix/Mary-Did-You-Know> (retrieved December 1, 2021)

seminary for introducing me to so many good voices. Shout out to [Jo-Ann Badley](#) who started me off in a good direction for this project.

The thinkers I engaged with were many and I've enjoyed considering the interpretations they presented. Feminist theology in particular was new to me. I couldn't get behind everything they said but still, so refreshing. In Reid/Matthew's book they spoke as *we*, giving honor to both their voices. I loved this. Independence feels ungodly, community feels right. Because of this. Mary's visit to Elizabeth resonates deeply with me.⁴ Women are good at community. In times of crisis or change they seek out companions to guide, to follow and to encourage.⁵ Mary did this. I do this too.

I've come to understand Mary as an everyday sort of woman, a thoughtful, faithful mom, a God follower⁶, a person not completely unlike me.

But how was she shaped?

In Carol Shields' novel *Swann: A Mystery*, which I loved, the academics, that were studying the work of the poet Mary Swann, a simple rural mother, without access to a library or education, wondered how she could have produced the beautiful evocative poetry that she wrote so, they dreamed up a scholarly background for her so as to account for her profundity. This made me mad.

I think Mary Swann and Mary the mother of Jesus (like me) learned things mostly in the cracks, those in-between child work, paid work, church work and housework places. I think Mary Swann and Mary (like me) learned through listening, observing, and lots of thinking, because the one thing that the repetitive nature of the mom-life affords is, lots of time to think. Over time, the things we read, observe, meld into our own thinking and something new and unique, but shaped by other voices, emerges.

⁴ Luke 1: 39-45

⁵ Obbard, Elizabeth Ruth. *Magnificat: the Journey and the Song*. Paulist Press, 1985.(page 2)

⁶ Spencer, F. Scott. *Salty Wives, Spirited Mothers, and Savvy Widows: Capable Women of Purpose and Persistence in Luke's Gospel*. William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2012. (page 72)

This helps me consider in new ways the possible origins of the profound prophetic poetry in the Magnificat. Light becomes focused, piercing and brilliant when it emerges through a crack, doesn't it? Mary's Magnificat⁷ is a light like that. Rooted in a rich oral, historical, prophetic tradition, but timely and fresh with hope and expectation.⁸ (It gives me hope that the systems that have shackled the poor, the oppressed and even me will yet be undone). Mary's voice is a voice from the outside, a voice from an unexpected place, a voice born out of the life of a simple rural observant intelligent woman. Isn't that so like God? The God of the unlikely.

Am I making Mary into what I need her to be? ⁹Am I inserting too much of myself here? I don't know. Still, I can't dismiss the legitimacy of this kind of formation.

When Jesus rescued me in the 80's the first order of business was a new wardrobe. My clothes, I was told, were 'not appropriate' (this is wrong on so many levels isn't it?). So, my grandmother took me shopping till I looked clean and matchy for the College and Career group that was trying to figure out what to do with me. Purity culture and me were not a good fit.

Purity culture. The virginity of Mary seems to me to be rational and right. The husband in this situation could only be God. But, all my life long I have understood from the church that even as a married woman, I was meant to exude this elusive virginal quality. Something is amiss here. I hope soon to have coffee with Jo-Ann because I'm undoing things and purity culture, with its overemphasis on the woman's responsibility in that equation, is one of those things.

I loved the notion that 'Mary treasured all these things up in her heart'¹⁰. Still do. As a perpetual blurter of all that is going on in my soul, I aspire to this. And, I've marveled at how she could actually be like that. Do that.

⁷Obbard, Elizabeth Ruth. *Magnificat: the Journey and the Song*. Paulist Press, 1985. (p.3-4)

⁸Obbard, Elizabeth Ruth. *Magnificat: the Journey and the Song*. Paulist Press, 1985. (p.3-4)

⁹ Personal email correspondence with Jo-Ann Badley October 24, 2021

¹⁰ Luke 2:19

Sometimes.

Quiet! Just be quiet! This is the trait Mary is most admired for, preached about, taught. In my reading I've been given a new perspective. Mary as a thinker. Mary as a sentient being. Mary who considers things deeply and wrestles to make sense of things.¹¹ And she was given a lot to make sense of wasn't she?

"How can this be? Since I am a virgin?"¹². Understanding this question as a *legitimate* question is new learning for me ¹³ Mary has been portrayed to me as if she were an 80's Valley Girl. Dizzy, dippy, clueless. Now, through the authors I've been reading, I see this episode as one where a rational intelligent woman asks a rational intelligent question. *How's this going to happen?* Sex, among other things, is a profound act of submission. She asked the question that anyone would/should ask.

I'm undoing things.

I wish, in my church life, more had been made of Mary as having the first Christian experience,¹⁴ Mary as having a 'cool beyond description' encounter with the Spirit of God, Mary as a faithful, resourceful (the poor are good at finding creative ways to cradle their babies) woman.¹⁵ Not dumb, not quiet, not too naive to do anything but say yes. Rather a thinking woman with some autonomy (small in her day) but still, a woman with a little agency, choice¹⁶. God doesn't force us to submit or conform. ¹⁷

¹¹ Spencer, F. Scott. *Salty Wives, Spirited Mothers, and Savvy Widows: Capable Women of Purpose and Persistence in Luke's Gospel*. William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2012. (page 98)

¹² Luke 1:34

¹³ Reid, Barbara E., and Shelly Matthews. *Luke*. Liturgical Press, 2021. (page 15)

¹⁴ Lloyd-Jones, David Martyn. *My Soul Magnifies the Lord: Meditations on the Meaning of Christmas*. Crossway, 2000. (page 86-87)

¹⁵ Brown, Raymond E., and Paul J. Achtemeier. *Mary in the New Testament a Collaborative Assessment by Protestant and Roman Catholic Scholars*. Fortress Press, 1978.(page 125-126)

¹⁶ Reid, Barbara E., and Shelly Matthews. *Luke*. Liturgical Press, 2021.(page 27)

¹⁷ Johnson, Elizabeth A. *Truly Our Sister: a Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints*. Continuum, 2009. (page 305)

Much has been made of Mary's youth and that irritates me. Pastors have preached this as: *come on, get it together, Mary was a teenager when she was the mother of God for crying out loud*. She and we are so much a product of our time and place. If my seminary studies and *Old Yeller* have taught me anything it's this: we are unavoidably shaped by our culture and our circumstances. Travis ran the ranch at the age of fourteen¹⁸. Now fourteen-year-olds shop online. Adolescents are not the same at all times and in all places. This is true. And yet, I find myself profoundly seen in Mary. Why? I want to go to three more places.

1. The Temple.

Jesus is late and Mary responds: *Where were you? I was worried?*¹⁹ Because Mary knew, as all mothers know: Late means dead!! Her questioning is not that of a simple minded woman. *Jeepers Mary, didn't you, like Jesus, realize, that of course he would be in the Temple*. She poses, rather, a normal question that every mother asks when their kids are late. An expected part of the coming-of-age process, when the child, moving to adulthood, says: "I'm fine"²⁰ Mary was a human mom.

2. Water into Wine.

Most moms have faced the situation where they have too many people to feed, too little food to do it with and they are in over their heads. Mary did. I have. When the kids were young, I made many trips from High River to a bible camp near Regina, a trip that meant filling up in Medicine Hat. On one of these journeys, after I had filled up, I couldn't find my credit card. I mean I really couldn't find it (and I was losing my ever lovin' mind). My pre-teen Matthew calmly said. "Mom. It's okay. We can just..." and then proposed various solutions. In that particular moment, Matthew came of age. This is a new nuance to how I now understand Mary and her confidence in Jesus. *Just do whatever he tells you*.²¹ She, as a mom, recognizes his maturity and capability, but also now and importantly, she becomes his disciple. She sees Jesus as the solver of problems, the provider of solutions, the competent one.

¹⁸ Gipson, Fred. *Old Yeller*. HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1992.

¹⁹ Luke 2: 41-42

²⁰ Reid, Barbara E., and Shelly Matthews. *Luke*. Liturgical Press, 2021. (p. 93)

²¹ John 2:5

3. Mary at the Cross.

I had long understood this scene²² to be a sentimental one: *Isn't that nice. Jesus gives Mary to John to look after, he's looking after his mom. I should look after my mom too.* However, when you look at this account in the light of the passage about *who are my brothers and sisters, who is my mother and father, the one who does what I say.*²³ Maybe this situation at the cross is more one of discipleship and completion. Mary, the first Christian disciple, who was faithful to raise Jesus in the traditional Hebrew way, is now being fully recognized as a disciple by Jesus. *You are my mother and John is my brother because you are both following me.* Family, not by blood, but in the sense of being part of the legitimate family of God.²⁴ (we should still look after our moms, though)

So that's it. For now. For all my reading and musings, I now see Mary as a regular, thinking, feeling, decision-making observer and reflector of the world around her, a prophetess, poet, spiritually formed within the opportunities and limits of her life's circumstances,²⁵ a mom come disciple who said *yes* at a critical juncture and then kept saying *yes*. She's someone I can journey with. She gives me possibilities. She gives me hope.

Thanks for reading.

With so much gratitude,

Colleen

²² John 19: 25-17

²³ Matthew 12: 46-50

²⁴ Brown, Raymond E., and Paul J. Achtemeier. *Mary in the New Testament a Collaborative Assessment by Protestant and Roman Catholic Scholars.* Fortress Press, 1978.(page 175)

²⁵ Green, Joel B. *The Gospel of Luke.* W B Eerdmans Pub Co, 1997.(page 138)

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