A Lay Educator’s Journey, 1969-1999

Janet Johnson Whitchurch, Menlo Park/Atherton

My introduction to Sacred Heart was as a large fenced piece of property my family drove by on our way to other places. This was in 1953 when I was ten years old and we had moved to Atherton. The convent was fifty-five years old. All that was visible were trees and a pink tower rising above them with a cross on top of it. When construction began on the Sigall building, closer to the road, I can remember my parents saying, “Well, they surely aren't skimping on that construction!” Later I can remember driving down Valparaiso and seeing girls standing outside the big wrought iron gates. They wore what I considered to be hideous uniforms; they were French Blue (appropriately enough) and made from a droopy synthetic fabric. The skirt was long (and modest) and there was a white blouse covered by a dismal bolero. These memories were all gathered indirectly in the 1950s. The only person I knew who went to the school did not talk much about her experiences there.

In 1969, having received bachelor's and master's degrees in art from Stanford University, I heard of a job available at Sacred Heart for an art teacher. For the first time, I went through the gates and onto the beautiful but intimidating grounds of the 1898 Convent. I felt small and inconsequential as I walked under the porte cochère up to the imposing doorway. Inside, the building was cool and cavernous with a minimal amount of furniture, the type that kept you sitting straight, on the edge of your chair. What was it going to be like to teach in this austere and formal place? I wasn't a Roman Catholic; would I still get the job? Thus it was that I began my relationship with Sacred Heart.

I was the first full-time art teacher the school had ever had. Art in various guises,
of course, had always been a part of the curriculum; usually one or more of the RSCJ had taught it. In 1969, though, there was not a nun available, and they had decided to expand the offerings. Many things at the Convent seemed to be in transition. Vatican II had changed the way subjects were taught, the way the nuns looked, and the way the school was funded. Many people were nostalgic for the old ways. For the Sisters too, things were changing. When I arrived, there were no religious wearing the bonnet and veil that fit close around their face. In fact, a number wore no habit at all. By the time I arrived, the nuns occupied less of the Main Building than previously; with the rule of cloister lessened, their domain had shrunk.

New demands were placed on the religious who led Sacred Heart Schools in the late sixties and early seventies, not the least of which was working with the lay faculty who were increasing in numbers. Rather than being run by the Province, the schools had to select and build separate Boards of Trustees. Fundraising became more of an issue with the need to pay higher salaries to lay-teachers. In 1973, when I became pregnant with my second child, the school had no medical insurance for pre-natal care, nor did they have maternity leave. I remember my mother was convinced that I would be asked to leave my job. Instead, adaptations were made to give me a month off for maternity leave, and, to the credit of the board of trustees' and the vision of the RSCJ, changes were made to accommodate this new situation.

Lay persons on the faculty were sometimes frustrated by the “inequities” we saw in a system that was designed not for us but for the nuns who had been running the school for years. The system was in transition, and while it seemed like it was changing too slowly, looking back now some thirty years later, I think the RSCJ were adapting and
changing as quickly as they could. In fact, I now marvel at how flexible they were. The
school's identity was changing in part due to Vatican II but also in part due to the changes
in demographics in the area and the decision of several nuns to leave the order.

The students were caught up in these changes too. Many of them who had been at
the school for more than eight years remembered all of the old formalities and rituals.
The students, and recent alums, however, did not seem to miss the 'old days' as much as
their parents and some of the older teachers and nuns. The students' memories were of
having to pass from class to class in silence, lining up in white dresses and veils for feast
days, and most of all of the dreaded 'clacker'. While I never saw the clacker being used, I
was treated by students to numerous demonstrations of the rising and genuflecting that
was regulated by the clacker at the beginnings and endings of classes. Some of the rituals
were looked back on with nostalgia, but some were loathed and the students were only
too glad to welcome change. In a cupboard in the faculty room I came some of the old
prime cards: très bien, assez bien and bien. The students and the nuns told us of the terror
Prîmes often struck in the hearts of the students; the worst thing that could happen was to
get no card at all.

While a number of students remembered the “old days,” even more of their
parents did, especially if they were alumnae of the school or had had older daughters go
through the school. I can remember Open Houses and Back-to-School Nights where
parents registered their distress at the changes. Usually this distress was couched in pleas
to the RSCJ to regain “control” of the school; innovation, and it most often seemed that
this was equated with 'lay faculty', was not what they were paying for. I remember one
father whose wife was an alumna of the school and who had three daughters in the high
school. He spoke out at one of the parent meetings and asked the other parents to be
patient and to trust in the wisdom of the Religious of the Sacred Heart who had run the
school well and with vision for seventy years and seemed more than capable of making
the best decisions for the future.

Students were affected by the conflicts and indecision ushered in at this time, but
they were also affected by what was going on outside of the school. The period of the late
sixties and early seventies was a period of great change for our whole society. No wonder
some of the parents wanted the school to remain as it always had been. No wonder some
of the idealistic young lay faculty were excited about some of the changes that were
being made to the school. No wonder the RSCJ struggled with the new identity of the
school which was evolving. And no wonder the students were testing and pushing the
limits of the new rules that were made and the new ways in which the curriculum was
taught. Being in the Bay Area, close to Stanford University and U.C. Berkeley, to say
nothing of Haight-Ashbury, increased the sense of being a part of some kind of
revolution.

A challenge throughout the seventies was to wisely use some of the freedoms
extended to all Catholics to make their faith more relevant and to integrate that into the
religion program which people expected at a Sacred Heart school. I remember the
discussions we used to have at lunch about the balance between freedom and tradition as
it related to liturgy. We were still having a First Friday Mass and frequent liturgies for
holidays and feast days, so our discussions often were enriched by the priests who stayed
after Mass to join us for lunch. We also tried to establish a balance between the
traditional sense of decorum and discipline that had existed at Sacred Heart and the new
iconoclastic ideas that were sweeping many educational institutions at that time. I remember the indignation of some girls who were punished for sitting on the grass in front of the main building with their uniform skirts pulled up over their knees so that they could get a tan. There were endless discussions about how short was too short for the uniform in this age of the mini-skirt. Instead of the old French Blue uniforms, the uniforms of the seventies were pink or yellow dresses, and none of them was worn below the knee. Issues around the changing uniform were sometimes the most contentious, but by no means the most serious, controversies at the School.

It is no surprise that the RSCJ from all over the country were joining together to write the Goals and Criteria. The issues found in Goals One, Three and Five were very relevant to the times. Society as well as the Catholic Church and the Religious of the Sacred Heart were all trying to figure out what embodied an “Active Faith in God”, “A Social Awareness that Impels to Action” and what it meant to foster “Personal Growth in an Atmosphere of Wise Freedom.”

Throughout the seventies, the curriculum at the School expanded and encompassed new areas. More science classes were added and their enrollment increased; more girls took advanced math and began to think of their education as a springboard to a career. My art classes got so big I moved from my small classroom on the third floor, and many other teachers with similar problems of growing too large for their space followed with their classes. New labs were built in the Morey Building as the elementary classes in this building were moved to St. Joseph's across campus. Eventually most of the third floor was devoted to housing for the nuns. An Art Gallery was created on the ground floor of the school by a family who had an extensive contemporary art collection. As a
I had the extra bonus of exposing my students to the very latest in modern art, and right in their own room. While many of the girls no doubt took these works of art for granted, I think that subsequently when they saw them in museums, they may have realized how lucky they were to be able to enjoy them on a daily basis. I had come to the school as the first full time art teacher and had managed to expand the program to include art history and, to a limited degree, curatorship of the Art Gallery. While schools of the Sacred Heart have traditionally been supportive of the arts and very much aware of the importance of aesthetic influences on their students, it was Sacred Heart, Menlo which first supported and developed such an enviable program.

Every year as we had our opening assembly, someone spoke about the vision and goals of St. Madeleine Sophie. When I thought of the women's movement that was so much a part of the social changes taking place, I was impressed by how ahead of her time St. Madeleine Sophie was. In the mid-1970s, the world around us was trying to change attitudes about what was pedagogically appropriate for girls. Of course, Sacred Heart Schools had been thinking about this for a long time, with varying degrees of success. In some ways we were still trying to figure out how to educate girls so that they could take on leadership roles in society. It was almost as if the rest of society had caught up with St. Madeleine Sophie's vision. Because of my interest in history, both art and political history, I was especially moved by her idea of starting a school during the political turmoil that followed the French Revolution. Even a hundred years later, in 1900, most women did not go to school. Even today, with college a matter of course for most women, it still seemed as if we had a long way to go both at this school and in our contemporary world before we met the goals established by the foundress of the
Religieuse du Sacre Coeur.

I was therefore stunned in 1984 when the board of trustees at Menlo, in a break with Sacred Heart tradition as I knew it, decided to close the boarding school and become coed. How could we apply the vision of St. Madeleine Sophie to boys? When I came to the school in 1969, I was one of the advocates of change. Showing my frustration with those who were mired in the school's past, I pushed hard with other new, young lay teachers for a more progressive curriculum, a faculty pay scale, greater freedom for the students. Throughout the changing seventies, I had been an agent of change, whether it was expressed in private moments of rebellion or in confrontations about curricular goals or pedagogical techniques. I felt that in some ways the school needed to be dragged into the twentieth century, but in other ways it had gotten there long before the rest of society and St. Madeleine Sophie's mission to educate young women was one of these ways. I felt we were betraying one of the main tenets of her vision; and the question remained: could we even educate boys in the way that we had been educating the girls? Most astonishing to me was the fact that many of the advocates for this change had been the ones who had resisted other changes along the way, changes that I found inconsequential when compared to this one. For me this amounted to a crisis of faith.

The change would mean not only the introduction of boys but also the closing of the boarding school. While the boarding school had faltered during the seventies, because of the general turbulence of the times, it had made a recovery and was rebuilding its program. The dorm added a perspective to the school student body that was not found in the students who came during the day. The worldwide network of schools was visible in the dorm. We had students from around the world who knew of Sacred Heart by
reputation or who came on exchange from their local Sacred Heart schools. Many of the Latin American families who sent their daughters to the school had been doing so for generations. After the fall of the Shah of Iran, a number of Persian girls had come to the school. Sacred Heart schools in Europe had long been known as a place for the daughters of diplomats to get an education, no matter what their religious belief, and Sacred Heart, Menlo also served this purpose. And what of our active exchange with students from other Sacred Heart schools in the U.S.? Would it survive the loss of the boarding school? The other loss in the closing of the boarding school was the twenty-four hour presence of students on campus. It was depressing to come onto campus during the weekends and the evenings after the dorm was closed; there was no noise, no lights and no activity coming from the main building. When the building was closed after the 1989 earthquake, its cold silence was even more depressing.

In 1984, the year the school accepted the first male students, I left, partly due to my unhappiness about the changes at the school and partly because I needed a break. With three children, a full time job had become exhausting and intruded into family life. Within three months, though, Sacred Heart had its strongest influence on me. During Advent that year I missed the services leading up to Christmas so much that I began to attend the Catholic church that was in my neighborhood. Fifteen years of living and discussing the relevance of life to the Church and vice-versa had turned me into a Catholic, much to my amazement. At first it seemed just a nostalgia for the liturgies, but then the more I reflected on my feelings, I realized that what I really was longing for was a faith-based life; Goal One had taken root! I remember how my Protestant mother had always criticized the Jesuit edict of “Give me your child at six and I will give you a
Catholic for life.” All I could think of is that St. Madeleine Sophie had succeeded beyond her wildest dreams in wanting to create a Jesuit-like school; her “Jesuit” school had this same proselytizing effect on those associated with it. It had even worked on an adult! By Lent I had found a sponsor, the director of studies at Sacred Heart, who when she found out I was converting said that she had always wanted to be a Godmother. I was confirmed during Advent of that year, a year after experiencing the gap left in my life that came with my departure from the school. I am grateful that I had a crisis of faith of a secular sort that led to an understanding of faith in a religious sense. I am convinced that had I never left Sacred Heart, I would never have experienced the spiritual void that I did.

By 1987, I was back at the school as a teaching assistant for the world history teacher who had more students than she could handle and needed me to help grade tests and papers. Then in 1989, I was called because, after one semester, the freshman history teacher had to be let go. Since I had helped develop the course, I was a logical replacement. So, in January of 1989, after fifteen years of teaching girls, I walked into my first coed class. The biggest problem I had in teaching these classes, the first classes I had ever taught with boys, was that I found male adolescent humor hilarious. And the boys did not take long to figure this out. I had always enjoyed boys and had two sons of my own; I just didn't think that boys belonged at a Sacred Heart school. How wrong I was.

Back when the decision was made to go coed, and members of the faculty debated the decision, one of the teachers kept saying how relevant Madeleine Sophie's vision was for boys. Not so much that they needed to be educated to take positions of leadership, they already were being educated for that. No, it was more the quality of leadership that
needed to be addressed. What could be better for boys than an education rooted in the humanities, an education that valued the whole child. In particular, this would be a school where boys learned about women. I can remember thinking, 'Sure, that'll last about one year before parents start complaining about their sons getting in touch with their “feminine side.” Would the English department still offer women's works; could boys read Jane Austen and Virginia Woolf? The idea was that we would bring a girls' school to boys intact and unchanged, except for the bathrooms. After teaching the freshman history class for a semester, my earlier skepticism about this being possible vanished. Much of what I had felt was best about Sacred Heart as a girls' school remained. A great deal of credit for this rested on the excellent faculty that stayed at the school through the change. Their willingness to adapt and find flexible solutions to problems, but also not give up on the important things, resulted in a school that did not lose its identity.

Another crucial aspect of the school's survival was the Goals and Criteria. While Sacred Heart, Menlo (now Atherton) made some very big changes in the mid-eighties, they were not able to throw the baby out with the bath water because the Network's Goals and Criteria made certain that the school remained a Sacred Heart school. I can remember the general eye rolling and attendant body language indicating exasperation that accompanied the early days of Goals and Criteria, but this framework allowed the school to change and grow within a strong context. It was only after I worked at other schools in the late eighties and early nineties that I saw how crucial the Goals and Criteria were to giving the school a focus.

After the earthquake of 1989, the Main Building was shut. Its stability in an earthquake had always been a concern and, while there was little visible damage, it was
felt that it would be too dangerous to allow people into the building. So this beautiful, old building, my first tangible connection to Sacred Heart, stood hollow and empty for the beginning of the nineties. Dismantling the building and removing all of the bricks was estimated at almost the cost of a new building, while remodeling it was even more expensive. There was an intense debate by the board of trustees about the wisdom of using money that might be better used for education for the “luxury” of remodeling the building. There was also the legitimate concern of whether or not the building was structurally sound. I, along with a number of other teachers, RSCJ, and alums felt the emotional and spiritual cost to the school of losing the building would be greater than any financial loss. Luckily, two devoted alums spearheaded the decision to retain the structure. Their efforts were seconded by a decision made by the board to start a fund-raising campaign for the renovation. I cannot describe the joy we felt when parts of the refurbished building were opened for the one hundredth anniversary of the school in 1998. The Mass we held alongside the building was a moment of triumph and gratitude. The emotional comfort of being able to return to the building has impacted not only those of us who knew it in the “old days”, but also the students who were not even born when the boarding school was closed in 1984. The building has soul and once again provides a center for our campus. The memories that permeate its rooms are available once again.

One of the comments that is often made by people visiting the Sacred Heart campus is that the relationships between students and faculty seem so warm and natural; there is a rapport that is remarkable and perhaps unique. For years, teachers have followed the adage to “educate the whole child.” This is emphasized no matter what subject is taught. It is because of this that teachers are acutely aware of their students as
individuals. They really look for those qualities that make each student special and respect whatever those qualities are. Largely because of this, students do not see teachers as “other”; they do not see their relationships with teachers as adversarial. Teachers say that they are there for the students, and they really act that way. This has always been one of the things that I have appreciated about working at Sacred Heart. That and the really palpable joy that the faculty feels in being intellectually engaged. Educating lifelong learners is another aspect of teaching here, and the faculty are great examples of lifelong learning. They are passionate in their interests and share their passions with their students. While I have always extolled the virtues of a Sacred Heart education, it had always been in theory until my daughter spent her senior year at Sacred Heart Preparatory.

When the younger of my two sons was in high school, the director urged me to enroll him at Sacred Heart now that it was coed, but he did not wish to come. Seven years later my daughter, his younger sister, seemed to be settled in the local public high school. I had resigned myself to never having a child attend Sacred Heart. Then, after her junior year, my daughter suddenly decided in the wake of some disappointments in both her academic and social life to come to Sacred Heart for her senior year. Her academic performance at her public high school had been uninspired; she was never really engaged intellectually. In addition, while she had many friends, she had felt unsupported as an individual in a large, competitive school. Her decision to come to Sacred Heart proved to be the perfect antidote. Within a few weeks of starting, she began to enumerate all of the things that she found so wonderful about the school. First, she appreciated going to a school that provided a spiritual basis for its students. Next, she appreciated the way the
small classes were taught; she felt very supported by her teachers and as a result of this, became more engaged. She also felt very comfortable with the strong sense of community on campus and with the way students from diverse backgrounds seemed to feel comfortable with each other. Finally, while she chafed at some of the rules, she felt reassured by the degree to which the principal, administrators, and teachers genuinely cared about the students, enough to make sure that rules were fair and enforced. Does this sound like an endorsement of the Goals and Criteria? After years of extolling the virtues of a Sacred Heart education, I was confronted with some very personal proof of how that education manifests itself. Suddenly this was not a pedagogical idea; it was not something I saw happening to a student in my class, someone else's child. It was happening to my own child! This should not have surprised me, but it did. My daughter came alive academically at the school and felt wonderful about all of the support she received from her teachers. The values that had enchanted me from the very first time I started to teach at Sacred Heart 35 years ago were still there, and I was lucky enough to have a daughter who benefited from them.

The remote image I had of the school forty-five years ago when we would pass it on the road has evolved into a relationship that encompasses my life. I met my second husband at the school, I discovered my faith at the school, and our daughter learned some of the most valuable lesson of her life there. Throughout it all, the school has provided me with a lifelong, ongoing education. I know that I have been educating students, but I feel that my experience at the school has also educated me. I have learned so much about myself at the school. I have learned much more about my subject as a result of teaching it to students, and I have been introduced to so many new subjects by colleagues at the
school. Our lunch time discussions of movies, books, and politics have kept me intellectually engaged and humbled. Most of all, it has been a joy to be a part of a community that celebrates the life of Christ, the Heart of Jesus, in so many varied and wonderful ways.