"My fourth grade held a very important incident – I became a full-fledged Dominican nun!"

This line begins a section bearing the title “Today I Am a Dominican!” in the autobiography Sister Joan Unger wrote at age sixteen. A reader puzzled by the assertion that Joan became a Dominican sister in fourth grade – and by the photos included showing the nine-year-old in a white habit – would see the mystery solved in just a few sentences; she went on to explain that she had played a nun in a school play. Still, however, one line from the teenaged Joan’s story about that experience would turn out to be prophetic: “You know, being a nun was fun. I think I’ll try it again sometime!”

Joan Adele Unger was born June 4, 1932, in Seattle, Washington, to Nathan and Ann (Sexton) Unger. She was the youngest of six children: two boys (James and Richard) and three girls (Natalie, Dorothy, and Rosemary) preceded her in the family.

One of Ann’s older sisters was a Sinsinawa Dominican whom Sister Joan met for the first time at age four. “I just looked and looked and looked!” at the tall woman in her habit and veil, she wrote in that autobiography. “… I did not understand why she wore so many wool clothes in the hottest part of the summer but I excused her for that.”

The children had plenty of room around the family home in which to explore and play, with almost an acre of grass dotted with daisies that often found their way into daisy-chain “jewelry” and more than a dozen fruit trees of various kinds. “Those days spent in these surroundings were some of the happiest of my life,” Sister Joan wrote. But those fruit trees almost led to catastrophe when she was eight years old. In an effort to rid the trees of caterpillars, Nathan and his sons tied a rag to a stick, dipped it in turpentine, set the rag afire, and used it to eliminate the caterpillars. But one of the boys accidentally dropped a lighted match into the turpentine, and when Joan stumbled over the pail some of the burning liquid splashed onto her legs. The result was a ten-week stay in the hospital and lifelong scarring.

Sister Joan’s early schooling came from the Dominican Sisters of Tacoma, Washington, at St. Edward’s School in Seattle. When she was eleven, the family bought a home in the city’s Queen Anne neighborhood, and she was enrolled at St. Anne’s School for sixth through eighth grades. Her high school years were spent at Holy Angels Academy in Seattle, and it was there that she first met the Dominican Sisters of Everett (later Edmonds), Washington. The Sisters made a deep impression on her, especially Sister Aquinas (who became the Edmonds congregation’s Mother Kathleen Logan), and the autumn after Joan graduated from high school in 1950 she entered the Everett Dominicans.

Tragedy struck just five months later when Nathan died suddenly. Sister Joan honored his memory with her religious name, Sister Mary Nathan.

In 1952, after completing her canonical novitiate year, she was sent to Aberdeen, Washington, to teach second grade at St. Mary School, and remained there until 1957. This ministry was followed by assignments to Our Lady of Good Help, Hoquiam, Washington (1957-58); St. Alphonsus, Seattle (1958-61); St. Benedict, Seattle (1961-62); St. Mary in Aberdeen for a second time, where she was principal in addition to teaching eighth grade (1962-64); St. Benedict in Seattle again, this time as
principal (1964-69); and St. Peter Martyr, Pittsburg, California, first as an eighth-grade teacher (August 1969-February 1971) and then as principal.

She completed her bachelor’s degree in education in 1962 and her master’s degree, also in education, in 1969, both from Seattle University.

A lengthy hospitalization forced her to resign from St. Peter Martyr in spring 1974. At that point she decided she wished to change ministries, and entered a Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) program in which she trained at hospitals in Mar Vista, California; Albuquerque, New Mexico; and Orange, California. From 1975 to 1978, she served on the Crisis Intervention Team at the latter hospital, St. Joseph in Orange, and then spent a year (1978-79) in volunteer ministry at the Hospice of Seattle.

That year overlapped with her being called to serve on the Edmonds Dominicans’ Executive Team, where she was Coordinator of Community Life from 1978 to 1982. When her term in leadership was up she went to Mundelein University to earn a Master of Arts in theology, which she completed in 1983.

Next came three years in campus ministry at the University of Washington, during which time she was appointed Vicar for the Catholic Newman Association for the 1986-87 academic year, and a year as Director of Pastoral Care at Holy Cross Hospital in Mission Hills, California. During the latter and throughout a sabbatical taken in 1987-88, she served her community in a two-year term as Director of Temporary Professed. Additionally, from 1983 to 1987, she served two consecutive two-year terms on the Edmonds Sisters’ Initial Formation Team.

In 1989, Sister Joan became a chaplain for the St. Joseph’s Healthcare System in Albuquerque, New Mexico, a position which she held for the next nine years until resigning in order to pursue preaching and related activities in a more concerted way. She remained in New Mexico for several years and then moved first to Edmonds and then to Seattle, continuing to minister through preaching and retreat work. In 2003, she became an Adrian Dominican Sister when her community merged with the Adrian Dominican Congregation.

Sister Joan became a resident of St. Joseph Residence in Seattle in 2016 and died there on December 10, 2019. She was in her sixty-eighth year of religious profession, fifty-one of those years as an Edmonds Dominican and seventeen as an Adrian Dominican. Her cremains were interred in Calvary Cemetery, Seattle.

At the wake service Sister Lorene Heck, Dominican West Chapter Prioress, remembered Sister Joan as a “creative teacher, spiritual companion, compassionate listener, incredible preacher, [and] woman of God,” someone who in her hospital ministry “accompanied the disheartened, the sick and the dying with great compassion, bringing beauty in moments of darkness” and whose later life of preaching touched many.

Joan’s enfleshing of the Dominican charism was so freely shared by her at Eucharist and interfaith liturgies, congregational and retreat gatherings. … Her preaching invited people to a place of trusting refuge, where one might experience “seeing with the heart.”

In [The Little Prince] by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, the tamed fox shares a secret with these evocative words: “One sees clearly only with the heart. Anything essential is invisible to the eyes.” Joan’s preaching invited listeners to look at things with a different pair of eyes until one could see them in their connectedness and wholeness – a glimpse at infinite and seemingly invisible things. Her preaching invited a contemplative mindset to “know spiritual things in a spiritual way” (1 Corinthians 2:13).
In her homily for Sister Joan’s memorial Mass held on December 21, Sister Mary Catherine Sullivan, her friend for almost six decades, reflected on Sister Joan’s life as it connected with the Gospel reading for the Mass, Luke 24:13-35 – the story of the “road to Emmaus.”

_In this reading we meet, as did Sister Joan Unger throughout her life, the mystery of God Among Us._

… Joan was a student of Catherine of Siena, of Meister Eckhart, of Teilhard de Chardin, Walter Bruggeman, and only for a brief moment of Ilia Delio. And I must include Peanuts: Linus, the little kid with the blanket, was her favorite character.

_Her road to Emmaus truly became one of preaching the Cosmic Christ of all Compassion, who dwells deeply in the unending love of Divine Energy and Creating Spirit, a God beyond all names and beyond human machinations, cultural restrictions and institutions._

Joan spoke the truth and in doing so her road to Emmaus was relational, inclusive, and other focused. In considering her own death, she wrote: “No extreme measures. I want to die when I am no longer able to love and be of service.

_Humbly, I am thankful for Joan. The gift of our friendship was fifty-five years long. Joan’s creativity and my curiosity found a home in each other. Joan and I were blessed; we believed each other to be our “Anam Cara,” a Gaelic term meaning soul friend, heart of the other within one’s own._

_May Joan continue to walk the road to Emmaus with each of us, and may we each be as blessed as she was – to cry out the Good News with our lives!_
Center: Sister Joan at the Aberdeen convent. Right: Sister Joan Unger in her office at St. Joseph Hospital, Orange, California, 1975

From left: Sister Joan enjoys her time at Marina Del Rey, California, 1976. From left, Sisters Joan Unger, Monica Fennessy, Edwina Sweeney, Alma Martinez, and Barbara Bieker
From left: Sister Rita Eileen Dean, OP, left, with Sister Joan Unger. Sisters Joan Unger, left, and Jeri Renner.