

Janet Erskine Stuart, Educator *Par Excellence*

Janet Reberdy, RSCJ

She was a woman of complexity – seemingly simple and yet quite simply profound. She was a shy, retiring person who had a telling impact on individuals in her own community and on the youth of more than a dozen nations. She was a semi-cloistered nun who traveled continents in a pre-World War I ambiance in which “ladies” seldom did such things. She was a traditionalist who, at the same time, looked to the future and became an innovator and a seminally productive thinker for her own and later generations.

Her focus in education was, like that of Madeleine Sophie Barat, the foundress of the Religious of the Sacred Heart, on the development of the whole person. This focus, evident again in our times, had been an integral part of Janet Stuart’s thinking three quarters of a century ago. It had – and has – five basic foundational points: a personal and active faith in God, a deep respect for intellectual values, a social awareness which impels to action, the building of community as a Christian value, and personal growth in an atmosphere of wise freedom. You will hear these fundamental concepts underlying all that Janet Stuart has written.

But who was she, and from whence sprung? She was born in November of 1857 in Cottesmore, County Rutland, England, a highly unlikely individual to become a Religious of the Sacred Heart. Her family traced its descent from Walter, High Steward of Scotland, in the reign of King David I, 1177. Also figuring in her genealogy were the thanes of Lochabar and the Banquo of Macbeth. After a succession of Lords of Avondale and Lairds of Ochiltree on the family tree, men regularly in and out of the royal favor, the baronetcy of Castle Stuart was raised in the nineteenth century to an Earldom. Robert, the second Earl, had three sons, of whom the youngest was Andrew, the Rector of Cottesmore and a priest of the Church of England. Andrew had married twice and had thirteen children in all, eight by his first marriage and five by the

second. Janet, the youngest child of the second marriage, became motherless before the age of three.

As a child, she was very intelligent, thoughtful, shy, daring, precocious. She tells us, “I remember thinking seriously on the subject of death at three years old. My brother Douglas, aged six, who was my great resource for theological questions, had explained to me what death meant, and had exhorted me to prepare for it.” She tells us that she neither liked the prospect nor considered it inevitable. If Enoch and Elias had escaped it, so would she. Another question roused her mind: Who made you and why? She had learnt Bible stories and was quite taken by the one about the raising of Lazarus and the suggestion that miracles could be wrought through faith and prayer. The six-year-old ran to the graveyard next to her home where her mother already lay. “Mama, come forth,” she cried, nothing doubting. As one biographer wrote, “The quiet solitude remained unbroken but something else, vital and intact still in its fragile sensitivity, received its first flaw.” As she said herself later, “The disappointment was very great, and left a seed of doubt in my mind that bore fruit later.” She had begun her intense and painful spiritual journey.

Now shift the scene to a comfortable rectory in Rutlandshire, where a brother and sister are discoursing in a schoolroom. Douglas breaks the silence: “Janet, Aristotle says every rational being must have an *end*. What is yours?” Janet faces the question; she does not know the answer. Neither does he. From now on begins the journey of a deeply sincere human being in quest of a reason for her existence. As a young woman of twenty-one, she wrote, “I reached a point that was more agnosticism than anything else.”

And then another blow fell. Her beloved eldest half-sister, Dody, who had been a second mother to her and set her searching for the meaning of life, died. To break the shock of this death, Janet went visiting in London where she came into contact with a Jesuit, Father Gallwey,

who makes a telling comment about her: “She is sure to come right because she does not come back to the same point once it has been answered.” He was right, but there remained the painful task of convincing those nearest to her that she just “follow the gleam.” She felt it would lead her from her father’s faith and his rectory. It was not easy. There was controversial reading and discussion, a sojourn at Cromer, “full of Quakers,” she writes “and no priest nearer than Norwich; an interview with Mr. Gladstone himself, who warned her against the “grave sin of moral suicide.” Nevertheless, she had caught a gleam, and on March 6, 1879, she was received into the Catholic Church. Goodbye to home, a much loved father, sisters, brothers. What passed between father and daughter no one ever knew, except for a few words penetrating the emotional ambiance. She said simply, “There was no anger, only cruel sorrow.”

There was a slightly longer than three-year interval between her leaving home and moving to London. There were three stages in her movement outward: a tour through Europe in 1880; a time of heightened awareness of social problems around her (as we would term it today, a “social awareness that impels to action”), during which time she taught Sunday School and did what we would call today “tenant advocacy” for the local farmers in counties bordering London; thirdly, there was the moment of light which was to show her the direction for her future. She writes:

One day, it was May 6, 1882, when I was walking through Regent’s Park to the Helpers of the Holy Souls, I was thinking of religious life and saying to Almighty God, “O my God, I should like it very much, but You see it is impossible to think of it,” and then and there standing by a bed of blue hyacinths *factum est ad me verbum Dei*, and I saw it all.

Father Gallwey suggested that she spend eight days in prayer and reflection at Roehampton, the central foundation of the Society of the Sacred Heart in London. There she could learn of the ethos and work of this congregation. While she was there, Father Gallwey had

written to the nuns that “If Miss Stuart should offer herself for the Society, she should not be refused. She is the most complete person I have ever known.” She entered the noviceship on September 16, 1882. Not many years later, she became the Mistress of Novices at Roehampton and, in 1911, Superior General of the Society of the Sacred Heart. During her three years at the Generalate, she traveled to Ireland, Scotland, Belgium, Holland, Italy, Sicily, Malta, Austria, Spain, Egypt, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, North and South America, meanwhile writing The Education of Catholic Girls, a volume of essays, a book of poetry, and an account entitled The Society of the Sacred Heart.

From this point on, I shall largely allow Mother Stuart to speak for herself as I draw from the foregoing works. To the forefront always is her insight into the basis of Sacred Heart educational philosophy and its focus on the education of the WHOLE person. Five areas chiefly concerned her: 1. character formation; 2. methods of preparing the soil to enable students to become WHOLE persons; 3. training for greatness; 4. inculcating the awareness and love of sincerity as a means of training character; and, finally, 5. the role of the teacher, as a person, in the educational process. Hear her:

On Character: The word *character* signifies a distinctive mark, cut, engraved, or stamped upon a substance; and, by analogy, this is likewise character in the sense in which it concerns education. “Man of character” is one in whom acquired qualities, orderly, and consistent, stand out on a background of natural temperament, as a result of training and especially of self-discipline, and therefore stamped or engraved upon something which was prepared for them... The sum of acquired habits tells upon the temperament, and, together with it, produce or establish character... If habits are not acquired by training, and instead of them temperament alone has been allowed to have its way in the years of growth... the result is want of character or a weak character without distinctive mark, showing itself in the various situations of life inconsistent, variable, unequal to strain, acting on the impulse, good or bad, of the moment; its fitful strength in moods of

obstinacy or self-will showing that it lacks the higher qualities of discernment and self-control... Character, then, may stand for the sum of the qualities which go to make one be *thus*, and not otherwise; but the basis which underlies and constantly reasserts itself is temperament.

On Methods of Preparing the Soil: Those who take up the training of the young have usually to learn by their own experience and study what is given to very few as a natural endowment – the art of so managing the wills of children that without provoking resistance, they may be led by degrees to self-control and become a law to themselves. It must be recognized from the beginning that the work is slow; if it is forced on too fast either a breaking point comes and the child, too much teased into perfection, turns in reaction and becomes self-willed and rebellious; or if, unhappily, the forcing process succeeds, a little paragon is produced.

On the other hand, if those who have to bring up children fear too much to cross their inclinations and so seek always a line of least resistance, teaching lessons in play, and smoothing over every rough place in the road, the result is a weak, slack will, a mind without power of concentration, and in later life very little resourcefulness in emergency, or power of bearing up under difficulties or privations. We are at present more inclined to produce these soft characters than to develop paragons...

Training for Greatness: We must kindle in the minds of children the ambition to do something more, whether it be in literature, art, science, or work for others; they must give themselves to the great Cause, by self-sacrifice to be in some sort initiated into its spirit, and identified with it, and thus to make it worth while for others as well as for themselves that they have lived their life on earth. There is a price to be paid for this, and they must face it; a good life cannot be a soft life, and a great deal, even of innocent pleasure, has to be given up, voluntarily, to make life worth living, if it were only as a training in *doing without*. Independence is a primary need for character, and independence can only be learnt by doing without pleasant things, even unnecessarily. Simplicity of life is an essential for greatness of life, and the very meaning of the simple life is the laying aside of many things which tend to grow by habit into necessities. The habit of work is another necessity in any life worth living, and this is only learnt by refraining again and again from what is pleasant for the sake of what is precious. Patience and thoroughness are requirements whose worth and value never come home to the average mind until they are seen in startling excellence... The value of time is another necessary lesson of the better life, a hard lesson, but one which makes an incalculable difference between the expert and the untried... We are apt to be always in a hurry now, ... but not many really know how to use time to the full. Our tendency is to alternate periods of extreme activity with intervals of complete prostration for recovery.

(And this in 1910!)

On Sincerity: One more lesson must be mentioned, the hardest of all to be learnt – perfect sincerity. It is so hard not to pose, for all but the very truest and simplest natures – to pose as independent while being eaten up with human respect; to pose as indifferent though aching with the wish to be understood; to pose as flippant while longing to be in earnest; to hide an attraction to higher things under a little air of something like irreverence... It is very hard to learn to be quite true; that entails more personal self-sacrifice than almost any other virtue.

On the Role of the Teacher (and also Parents and Friends) in the Work of the Educational Process: What do we want to bring up? Not good nonentities, who are only good because they are not bad. There are too many of them already, no trouble to anyone, only disappointing, so good that they ought to be so much better, if only they would. But who can make them be more?... Those who have to educate them to something higher must themselves have an idea of what they want; they must believe in the possibility of every mind and character to be lifted up to something better than it has already attained; they must themselves be striving for some higher excellence, and must believe and care deeply for the things they teach. For no one can be educated by maxim and precept; it is the life lived, and the things loved and the ideals believed in, by which we tell, one upon another. If we care for energy we call it out; if we believe in possibilities of development we almost seem to create them. If we want integrity of character, steadiness, reliability, courage, thoroughness, all the harder qualities that serve as backbone, we, at least, make others want them by the power of example that is not set as deliberate good example, for that is as tame as precept; but the example of the life that is lived, and the truths that are honestly believed in.

It is clear that in these few excerpts from a masterful work, Janet Stuart has enunciated the same principles encoded in our present day Goals and Criteria of Sacred Heart education. The language is different, the content is the same: a focus on the development of the WHOLE person (mind, heart, spirit, character) through the nourishing of a relevant faith; respect for the things of the mind in every field; social awareness of the needs of the world in which we live; the building of community in the speedily emerging “global village”; and personal growth in an atmosphere of wise freedom. Janet Stuart probed deeply into the nature of personhood based on that seminal question which occurred to her in early childhood: What is life for? It is a question which never left her mind, and she based her philosophy of education, hers and ours, on her insights into what it means to be human, what it means to be a fully developed human, what it means to live life really and truly.

Janet Reberdy, RSCJ, attended Lawrence Avenue (Detroit) and Manhattanville; she is on the administration at Stone Ridge School of the Sacred Heart.