Dear Friend,

Happiness Runs in a Circular Motion by Donovan climbed the song charts in the late 1960s. When I finished interviewing Sister Barbara Faris, the song came back to me after years of not thinking of it at all. Her pursuit of happiness throughout her life and the efforts she made to give others a chance to enjoy happiness are indeed circular.

Barbara was born in Fond du lac, Wis. Her mother Theresa had immigrated from Austria. Her father was from Fond du lac and of Lebanese descent. He ran the family tavern where he served food and drinks enjoyed by the working class.

As a child, Barbara wanted to be a missionary. The example of her mother gathering good used items of clothing, washing, ironing, and packing them carefully in boxes to give to clothing drives taught her the value of helping those who had little. Barbara would help her mom choose clothing items from among her own clothes, so her experience of giving was very real. She questioned why her mother would go through all the trouble of getting the clothes ready so neatly when others just brought in their clothes stuffed in bags, and learned that her mother believed that “you always give your best to the poor.”

Barbara also saw that her dad would give away extra food and meat to those in need. He knew a lot of people in town and was sensitive to those who would make good use of whatever he could give. It was giving from the heart.

Barbara attended St. Patrick Elementary School and St. Mary’s Springs High School. School was not her favorite activity, with the exception of recess and physical education classes. However, she studied hard and got good grades for her parents’ sake. Later on in life, she would earn graduate degrees and specialized certificates in pastoral care and hospital chaplaincy.
Her decision to enter our community after high school was influenced by a classmate, Mary Moss [Sr. Lauren Moss (†2004)], who was in her Latin class, and they got to know each other. Mary introduced her to the community and they ended up entering together in September of 1955. At reception to the novitiate, Barbara was given the name Sr. Mariel, and Mary was given the name Sr. Lauren. Barbara would return to her baptismal name after Vatican Council II.

Sr. Barbara began her teaching ministry as a senior novice. With memories of her unhappy experiences in school, she tried her best to make the classroom a happy place for learning. Her own discomfort with confinement motivated her to do all she could to “loosen it up” for the students. Breaking from tradition, the desks were not in rows but in clusters. One corner of the classroom was set up as a reading corner. There was more movement which created a very active classroom. All of this innovation in the late 1950s met with acceptance or disapproval depending on the principal and/or her teaching mentor.

She loved the students and remembers with great fondness one April Fool’s Day with her class of 7th graders. Coming back to the school building after eating lunch in the convent, she was a bit alarmed as she walked down the hall by the silence coming from her classroom. Ordinarily it was a matter of walking into a lively classroom with what always seemed like everyone talking at once.

When she got to the classroom, she saw that there was an empty bottle of liquor of some sort on every desk. Behind every bottle sat a quiet student with hands folded. Then there was the shout, “April Fool!”
Not to be outdone, later in the day Sister Barbara turned abruptly from the blackboard where she was writing and said to the class, “Oh my gosh, I forgot!” She proceeded to tell the students that the class must exit immediately in perfect silence and line up outside on the playground. Which they did in an orderly, quiet manner. Once they were outside and midway across the playground, Sister Barbara yelled, “April Fool!” Levity and laughter go a long way in the pursuit of happiness.

After several years of teaching, Sister Barbara spent a year at Mundelein College in Chicago and received a master’s degree in religious education in 1973. This was followed by working as a pastoral minister with the Native American people in Montana for eight out of nine years until 1983. The next year Sister Barbara studied for hospital chaplaincy certification and ministered in several different hospitals through 2003, and during the last six of those years, she also studied for master and doctorate degrees in Jungian psychology. Her dissertation was a psychological study of St. Clare of Assisi.

Until her retirement in 2009, she ministered as an adjunct professor and hospital chaplain. But there was still one more ministry/missionary venture in her future on a Native American reservation in Montana. Although fully retired and living at our former Clare Hall close to the Motherhouse, in April 2015 she packed up and drove back to Poplar, Montana, to live and work among the people she had first met in 1980.

Being present and available was Sister Barbara’s focus in Poplar. She volunteered where needed and that took her, in part, to tutoring in the school, counseling informally, encouraging those involved in the twelve-step program, and attending special events, like a Christmas party for the children, that included the parents to make it a family party. She has a talent for seeing the goodness in others and relates an interesting encounter.

In May of 2020, shortly before Sister Barbara returned to Milwaukee, she wrote to the congregation in our OSF Bulletin:
As Franciscan women with a commitment to caring for all of creation, the Sisters of St. Francis of Assisi use environmentally friendly or post-consumer paper and soy ink whenever possible.

The tree branches here are beginning to peek out hesitantly in outlines of green against the sky... ‘a future full of hope,’ as promised by our faithful God. Be strong, (in your weaknesses), brave, and filled with the love of our Creator. Beautiful things continue to take place in hidden and small ways throughout this ‘cloistered’ world. For example: For 35 years, my friend has been clean and sober and a constant support to other recovering addicted people. He told me about stopping for gas at the Tribal Express service station and store on a busy highway. As he was exiting the store, a hitchhiking young ‘white man’ approached him and asked if he could spare a dollar. My friend handed him a $20 bill! The youth was flabbergasted. When I asked my friend why he did that, he said: ‘I saw myself in that young boy and remembered when I was in the same situation – no home, nowhere to go, flat broke and scared.’

Her story ends with this thought: I wonder how many more beautiful and kind things are taking place all over the globe. Countless, I believe.

Happiness Runs in a Circular Motion. We all have our own way of creating the conditions for happiness for others with the result that that happiness, more often than not, returns to us in some form. Our retired sisters find happiness in feeling that they are not a burden to the congregation. You, our donors, play a great part in creating the condition for their happiness because of your gifts that help meet the costs of retirement. Retirement benefits were never a part of our contracts when we were staffing parish schools. Salaries were set arbitrarily and they usually did not cover living expenses.

Our sisters live simply. Their needs are reasonable. However, the costs of health care continue to increase and, with age, comes greater frailty and greater need for medical intervention. Your gift of any size is received with sincere gratitude.

Thank you so much. May true happiness overflow in your life.

Blessings,

Sister Marcia Lunz, OSF

Top Photo: Sr. Barbara (left) with a patient and a family member during her ministry as a hospital chaplain at St. John Medical Center in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Bottom Photo: 50-Year Jubilee (L to R)
(Back) Sisters Ruth Marie Soens & Kathleen Denevan
(Front) Sisters Barbara & Marianne Muscott