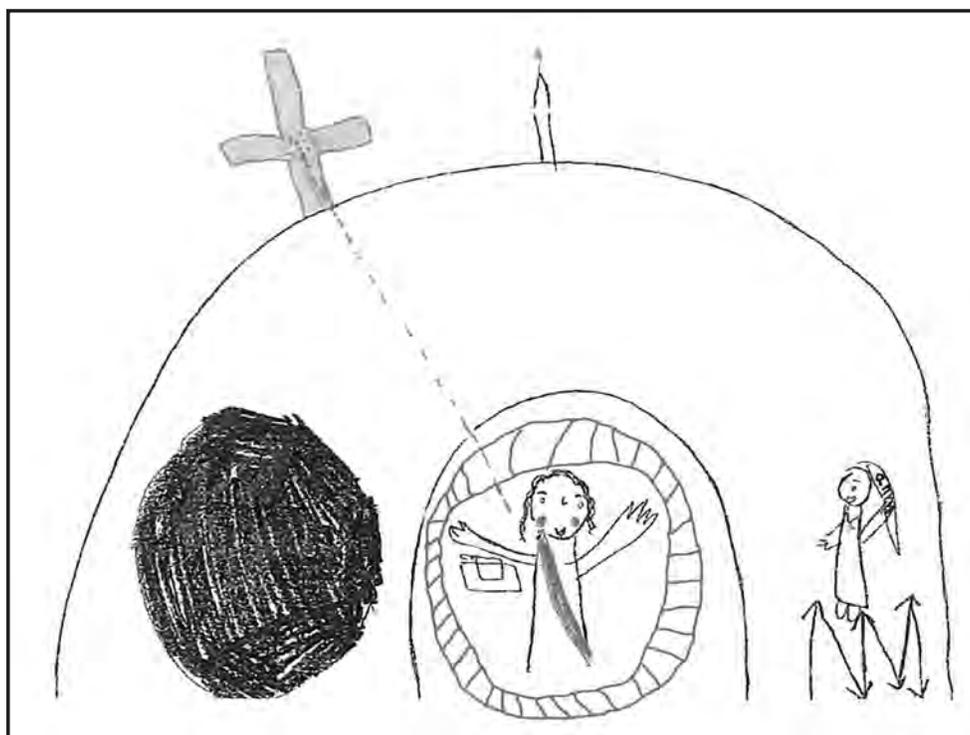


# A Celebration of the Life of Tina Lillig



*Anna, age 6  
Good Shepherd  
Center  
Memphis, Tennessee  
(The cross is brown,  
the candle flame is  
yellow, the stone  
is black, Jesus's robe is  
white with a red  
sash. The dotted line  
is red. Yellow rays  
encircle Jesus.)*

## BARBARA SCHMICH SEARLE

*This article is based on the Homily that Barbara Searle gave at the funeral of Tina Lillig. The readings for the Mass were: Wisdom 7:22b—8:1 (Jerusalem Bible), 2 Corinthians 4:13—5:1 (New American Bible), and Luke 24:13—35 (New American Bible).*

We have heard the Word of God proclaimed in our midst. It is now our common task to meditate on that Word and hear what it is saying to us at this heart-rending moment of loss, to linger with the Word and let it seep into the deepest places of our pain and sorrow where it can do its work of healing and revivifying.

Please bear with me if these reflections are somewhat lengthy. I have to say in my own defense, it is not entirely my fault. Every time I thought I was finished, I would hear Tina, “Barbara, do you think you would be able to mention these

people?” Add a few more sentences. Then later, “Barbara, do you think it might be worth addressing this idea?” Add another paragraph. Then again, “Barbara, enough about me, a little more about God.” Even as I was trying to condense these reflections, she was trying to expand them! As we know, when Tina asked us to do something, it felt like we were reenacting the Annunciation: saying “Yes” always seemed the most right and loving thing to do.

Each of the readings presents us with an image of the mysterious workings of God, and the life, death, and new life of Tina Varias Lillig give us an entrance point into these mysteries.

The first reading, from the Book of Wisdom, takes us back, at least in spirit, into the life of God before the world began. Wisdom seems to have been with God from all eternity; in fact, some call her the feminine face of God. We heard her praised

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for her many attributes—almost too many for us to hold in our minds at once.

Perhaps most poignantly for this community today, we hear that in each generation Wisdom passes into holy souls; she makes them friends of God and prophets.

How can this be possible? How can this power of God take up residence in the narrow room of a human soul? How can a human being become a friend of God? How can a human voice come to speak for God in prophecy? These are surely great mysteries.

Tina has been among us these many years gently showing how to hold these kinds of questions in our hearts and helping us to imagine that such bonds with God are indeed possible.

She was and is a holy soul. God came to her in Baptism and made a home in her. In the context of family life with her father and mother, brother and sister, she learned in mysterious ways of God's desire to befriend her. Her capacity to receive divine love and wisdom grew as she grew. She spoke openly of the great love she received from her husband, John, and how shepherding a presence he was for her. Together she and John welcomed three sons, and she fell in love with each one of them, nurturing them out of her body and soul. Through them she fell in love with the Child.

She came to recognize in the work of Maria Montessori a kindred spirit who valued the experience of the Child as having intrinsic worth, and she came to know the work of Sofia Cavalletti and Gianna Gobbi, who developed the approach to enabling children to live their religious potential that we



*Cade, Level II atrium  
St. James Episcopal Church  
Jackson, Mississippi*

*(The sun is yellow, the sky is blue, the three crosses are black, and the grass is green.)*

know as the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd. It is through these women, and those who worked in their spirit, that Tina found spiritual mothers and was further initiated into divine friendship.

During the more than thirty years she worked in the Catechesis, she gradually took on the work of a prophet. Wisdom called her, trained her, and sustained her. She accepted more and more leadership roles, and eventually the position of national director. She was a brilliant administrator who could see the biggest of pictures but also attend to the smallest of details. She collaborated with each of her sisters and brothers in the Catechesis out of genuine respect and admiration.

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She was a valued member of the international dialogue, and her life and death have truly changed the world. Through it all, she spoke rightly about God, about the Child, and about the Catechesis. Her prophetic voice was not so much about the future as it was about the essential in the present moment.

Even as her ministry was becoming more extensive, her personal life was also being enriched. In time John and Tina welcomed three daughters-in-law, and she who had no daughters often commented on how wonderful it was to have the love of young women in her life. But it was the birth of her six grandchildren that surprised her the most, how they loved her in such sweet and original ways. She was in a continual state of wonder.

We are deeply grateful to you, Tina, for cooperating with God's wise and loving incarnation in you, for showing us how to be holy, how to be a friend of God, and how to be a prophet. We know you will never stop inviting us into these mysteries.

The second reading, from Paul's letter to the Corinthians, points us to the future of our life with God. Like Jesus, who was raised from the dead by the One who loved him, we too will be raised up and enjoy the divine presence. Eventually God will be all in all, and the great moment of the Parousia will happen.

If that were not mystery enough, Paul goes on to tell us that our experience of suffering in this life has some intrinsic connection to "the weight of eternal glory." As "our outer self wastes away, our inner self is being renewed day by day." How can this possibly be? Why would decline and even death ever be related to renewal and rebirth? How could a person, especially while going through it, ever see affliction as "light" or "momentary"?

Here again, Tina leads us into these mysteries. She had, it would seem, almost more than her share of suffering. In addition to various physical conditions that weakened her body, she had known experiences of trauma and loss. She was no stranger to the human emotions of deep sadness and fear.

During much of the last years she endured various kinds of physical pain. She by no means just accepted it, but even though she tried assiduously to find comfort and healing, there were very few periods of relief. As the beautifully honest obituary reads, only her husband John knew the full extent of her suffering. Yet she did not complain or let it turn her away from her life and her work. She did not stop smiling her stunning and glowing smile, or cease finding many things, especially the incongruities of life, genuinely humorous. She often laughed to the point of not being able to speak and drew the rest of us into that laughter.

How could she do this? How could she go on creatively in pain? How could she not just give up? It seems that for Tina there was a somewhat conscious choice point: What is going to be in the foreground of my life? What is going to be in the background? She chose life and love, not pain, to be in the foreground.

As we noticed earlier, she saw herself as the recipient of love from many people, and I think this is the great secret of her life and the way she dealt with her pain. The rest of us might turn inward and say in the face of suffering: others don't love me enough, others don't love me in the right way or at the right time, the right people aren't loving me, or they're not loving me for the right reasons, and so on. But Tina received love from whence it came and enjoyed it fully in all of its manifestations, both human and divine. And always she had a grateful heart. This seemed to be her particular way of living the mystery to which Paul alludes: even in the tent of her suffering she connected to the unseen and eternal dwelling of God's creative love.

Tina had every intention of continuing in this spirit, planning her retirement in a few years in order to have more time for herself and her family, and to concentrate on a few specific catechetical tasks. Many of us thought we would know far in advance if she were failing, and would have time to be with her. But that was not to be in God's mysterious plan for her salvation.

"We children love God as much as he loves us but together we make one. God loves us as much as we love him. We make one together."

*Claire, age 7  
Church of Our Saviour  
Chicago, Illinois*

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Whenever we humans are confronted with sudden death, questions begin to form in our minds, questions like: Did she know? Was she ready? Was she afraid? My sense of Tina in the last six months was that even as she was planning, she was also submitting herself to the unknown. John found among her recent papers some handwritten notes from Cavalletti's second book on the religious potential of the child:

"Death is but a moment of life. This is a fundamental reality of our world. . . . Death and life are tightly bound in the announcement of the resurrection: Life is stronger than death . . ." (*Religious Potential of the Child: 6 to 12 Years Old*, p. 4). Death is like an invitation and we must give up our plans. . . . [The Good Shepherd calls us] to perceive the mystery of life as a gift from a person.



Nolan, age 10  
 Holy Trinity/Holy Cross  
 Kansas City, Missouri  
 (Drawn after Plan of God narrative.  
 Asked about his drawing, Nolan said,  
 "Jesus's wounds bring peace.")

John also said that on the morning of her invitation, she had had a dream signaling a profound change in her life. Tina's whole life had been a preparation. There is every reason to think she knew at some level and was ready and welcoming. It was, after all, Advent, and she was preparing herself for the various comings of Christ. As she used to sing with the youngest children during Advent, "Jesus is knocking at our door."

And so it came to pass that on Friday, December 11th, at approximately 3 PM she was stricken. Throughout Saturday she endured the tomb-like experience of fever and coma. Then, early the next morning, on the Sunday we call Gaudete, the day for rejoicing in Advent, she passed over into her new life. December 13 is also the Feast of St. Lucy, whose yearly celebration is focused on light and reflects the great Easter liturgy of light. It is not hard to see how her death conforms to the pattern of Christ's Passover even in temporal details. We trust; we believe; dare I say *we know* she is with him now.

Please permit me one personal story. From the moment I heard of Tina's stroke I was filled with shock and sorrow and a physical heaviness. I was able to be with the family in the hospital on Saturday, but left not knowing how long her dying might take. I awoke about 2:00 AM on Sunday morning filled with a sense of lightness and joy. In my imagination, I heard the music from the movie *Chariots of Fire* and saw the icon that hangs in my parish church showing Ezekiel's vision of Yahweh's fiery chariot moving upward. I was sure then that Tina had died. But even in that very moment I had to smile because, if the truth be told, Tina is probably the last person who would ever ride in a chariot, much less a chariot of fire. In this world she probably would have said, "Go ahead and enjoy it. I'll just sit here on the bench. You can tell me all about it when you get back." But in my mind's eye I saw her in this new world, enjoying the experience immensely, looking back over her shoulder to us and exclaiming in her own inimitable way, "This is *amazing!*"

This brings us to the Gospel, the Good News for us today. The story of Emmaus speaks of our present religious reality, the time between the Resurrection and the Parousia. When catechists introduce children as young as three years of age to the Eucharist, they proclaim the essence of the Resurrection: "Christ died on a cross; he arose from the dead, and he is with us still." It is the "with us still" that the Emmaus story emphasizes.

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As Christians we are not expected to believe in a resurrection that is just an idea. In the loving kindness of our God, Jesus showed himself alive, we are told, by many appearances, and during them he continued to tell his disciples about the Kingdom of God. The resurrection appearances are paradigmatic stories that show us how a person who has died continues to live and be present in a community. The Emmaus story is a particularly tender and intimate one.

You know the characters, the settings and the story line, so let us focus on the ways the disciples experienced Jesus's presence. After he spoke to them and opened up the Scriptures, they realized that their hearts had been burning within them. When Jesus gave the impression that he was going on farther, they desired, even insisted, that he stay with them a while longer. And then at the meal when he said the ordinary table prayer and did the ordinary table gesture, their eyes were opened.

In the days, and the weeks, and the months, and the years ahead, we will miss Tina terribly. We will keep on walking; we will keep on talking among ourselves; we will be downcast; we may even wonder why other people do not understand our grief. Then, when we least expect it, we will feel her presence. Our hearts will burn within us; we will want her to stay longer; our eyes will be opened. It will feel like old times, and yet it will be totally new.

Then, sadly, it will seem as though she vanishes again. We will hold on to our experiences of her as long as we can, but we will not be exempt from the natural process of grieving. We will need to experience fully every feeling that arises within our hearts; we will need to express those feelings in some way: through tears, sobbing, even wailing, but perhaps also in bodily movements, in vocal sounds, in images, in

journals or in stories and conversation. Afterwards we will have to return to our ordinary lives and try to be as present as we can to the people there. Though this may sound like an oxymoron, we need to schedule time each day to allow ourselves to remember, experience, express, and return.

We will not be grieving in order to one day forget Tina; we will grieve so that our experience of her and our love for her will be made simpler, more essential, more profoundly embodied. The deaths of our loved ones invite us into the mystery of Christ's Resurrection and his presence today more than any text of any kind ever could. We come to know in our bones that they live very near to us, and we come to recognize the new ways they are present in the world.

Let us not pretend for a moment that Tina's presence, like Christ's, will be about anything less than the building up of the Kingdom of God on this earth. To be sure, she will be God's angel of consolation at times, but she will also have real work for us to do, and maybe even "big work," whether that be in the privacy of our own hearts, in our relationships, in the Church, or in the world. So we would all do well to be prepared!

We move now to the Liturgy of the Eucharist where we will participate in the breaking of the bread and where we will commune with Jesus, the Good Shepherd, the True Vine. We believe that when we are united with Jesus, we are also united with all those around the world who stand at his altar. We believe that when we are united with Jesus, we are also united with all those throughout history who ever lived the life of faith. We believe, Tina, through this mystery of Christ's Eucharistic presence, we will be with you and you with us.

"I think that the sap is love, faith, blood, light, and life. . . . Believe in Jesus and you will remain on the vine. Love him, believe in him, let him give you blood, let him give you light, let him give you life, let him tell you parables through the Bible, and remain on him."

*Isabel, age 7  
Queen of Angels Montessori  
Cincinnati, Ohio*