

WORDS OF REMEMBRANCE

March 22, 2019

A few weeks before Brother Jeffrey died, I sat with him to begin a discussion of end-of-life matters. As an introduction to our conversation, I asked if he knew about the *Ten Wishes* wherein we are encouraged to list things we would like when we are dying, especially if we are unable to tell others what our needs are. I suggested that he think about what he may want and be prepared to tell me at a later date, and moved on to the next discussion point, but he stopped me and said that he knew exactly what he wanted: a gorgeous little vase he had once had with a sprig of greenery, perhaps a fern in the opening. He described the vase in detail, though he hadn't seen it in many years. He remembered giving it away, but could not remember to whom he had given it. As he was describing the vase, I put down my pen and paper, with tears in my eyes. I realized that I was the one to whom he had given the vase, and that I would be able to return it to him, and thus give him his wish to have it and the fern with him in his last moments.

This is the way he explained his wish. The vase itself represents life from which new life, the fern, is emerging; it is in transition. *Life* is in transition, moving from one form to another. Death is a *transition* from life to another life. “Remember this,” Brother Jeffrey said, “and nothing more. I do not wish to be remembered for my studies or my writing or my theology or anything else.” His gray vase and fern are now before you here, as they were before him the night he died.

Brother Jeffrey spoke of the vase, the fern, and the transition in terms of life and death, but I believe that he meant it in other terms as well. Each time we

undergo a *transition*, a change in a decision, an attitude, a resolution, a relationship, a better choice, each time *that transition creates new life*. Brother Jeffrey helped to make many life-giving transitions for all of us.

For his teaching, counseling, championing, defending, for his friendship, his Brotherhood, for his unconditional love, for all that he was, we are grateful.

Now, together, I ask that each of you join me in a letter to Brother Jeffrey expressing our gratitude. The letter is a compilation of notes written by many who knew him.

Listen with your heart and you will hear your own voice.

Dear Brother Jeffrey:

We send you this letter in gratitude for all the transitions you offered us, for all the ways you breathed life into us, for your unconditional love for each of us and in so doing you touched our hearts.

Thank you, Brother Jeffrey, for being an exceptional teacher; for listening to me and helping me; for making Saint Paul's a special, caring place for me and my brothers. Thank you for being my friend. Thank you for believing in me when I couldn't believe in myself. Our Brotherhood has been a special gift for me and so many others.

We are grateful that you loved the young people in your care; that you communicated with passion the lessons of our Founder; that my ministry is better because you guided me in living our ministry as Brothers; that you had strong opinions and did not hold back in what you believed is right. We are

grateful that you stayed on the cutting edge in your teaching and counseling, that you were an avid reader, a model educator always staying ahead in relational and pedagogical matters, that you always placed students and their needs at the center of all. We are grateful that you showed us how to have an appropriate respect for rituals and beliefs of other world religions and people; that you had an extensive knowledge of the Founder and the Institute, and that you believed that God is a loving and caring Father you called “Abba.”

I will remember that you showed me through your brotherhood what one looks like when his heart is on fire; that you shared your dreams and invited me to be a part of them, dreams for our Brotherhood, young people, colleagues on fire with the mission. I will remember that you contributed so much to our work in Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea and others; that you modeled the teachings of de la Salle; I will remember that you taught me life skills during my teenage years which I pass on to my kids; I will remember that you made sure I graduated; that you were grace-full; that you were always positive and dedicated; that you had a great impact on my son; and I will remember that you were the one who taught me to pray in silence. I pray daily now.

Thank you, Brother Jeffrey, for teaching me to “take care of the kids, and the rest will fall into place;” for teaching me to never forget that our students are a reflection of God’s love, especially the most troubled or difficult ones; for showing me what it means to love unconditionally and generously even when I make grave mistakes.

And thank you, Brother, for teaching me and for continuing to teach me even after your death.

I appreciate these traits that you modeled so well. You were an independent thinker, and made decisions based on your own convictions. You had a heart for those who did not belong. You were a man of commitment. You were the one who changed my life forever, from a life of mediocrity to a life worth living in step with the Lord. You were my friend; you believed in me and you showed me how to love and be loved. You were very supportive of me and encouraged me to overcome my fears. And you were concerned about the aging brothers in your community and wanted very much to return to them.

In all your challenges, Brother Jeffrey, you held to a continuous theme: do not allow the limitations of your perspectives, however well-funded or orthodox to block your ability to be the face of God's unconditional love and acceptance of a young person.

Thank you, Brother Jeffrey, for all that you were and all the fern-filled vases you offered us. Even though you have died, you will always live in our hearts. We will miss you! Rest easy, my brother; your inspirational work is done, but you will always be remembered for the many hearts you have touched and lives you have changed.

Rest in peace and God's love.

Though we could not all speak to you individually today, Brother, we trust that you heard our individual, heartfelt appreciation in the voices spoken today. Know that all personal notes written to or about you are contained in the bowl near your vase.

Sincerely and lovingly,

All of us

While Brother Jeffrey slept peacefully on his last day, two of his students sat on the floor beside his bed, one on each side, and each silently held one of his hands. The others present too were silent, sensing a special moment. I was reminded of depictions of the Founder John Baptist de La Salle with children beside him.

Thank you all for remembering Brother Jeffrey Calligan.

Merle Martin Dooley