

On Pilgrimage - May 1980

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Summary: Finds it hard to write about her sister Della who died—"my closest friend and confidante." Recalls growing up in Chicago together and their reading, conversations, and walks. Notes their differences over birth control—Della had worked for Margaret Sanger who Dorothy once interviewed. (DDLW #603).

Coming from a newspaper family, I usually do not find it a chore to set pen to paper to write my usual column for **The Catholic Worker**, but this time it is hard, indeed, because I have lost my sister, who had always been my closest friend and confidante. I should add too, that I do not mind writing **personally**. All of us were constant readers in our home, and I, myself, liked those books best which were written in the first person, like **David Copperfield**, and the reader was closely identified with the joys and sufferings of hero and heroine.

Thinking now of Della, my sister, my mind leaps back to a particularly vivid year in Chicago, where we were living at the time in a comfortable house near Lincoln Park. I was fifteen and Della was thirteen, and we were both "in love" for the first time, with two brothers, who lived on the same street, both young, married, and with small children. My infatuation was with a tall, blond German, who led the band concerts in Lincoln Park, a few blocks away. His name was Armin, and concerts were on Wednesday evenings and Sunday afternoons. Arthur Hand was a violinist in the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, and he often passed the house on his way to practice. My advantage over my sister was that I could see my beloved for hours at a time as he led the band in the park, and he seemed in closer touch with the people as he turned to answer to the applause and, perhaps, add an encore to our delight.

There was no opportunity for us to go to the evening symphony concerts in downtown Chicago, and opera was unknown to us.

We were all great readers in our family, and we had a large living room with a round, center table with a gas lamp with a large, square, green-glass shade over it. Around this large table, with its green baize cover, there were three or four comfortable chairs, so placed that the lamplight shone on one's book. There was no electricity then. There was a furnace in the house, but the living room was so large the open fireplace, which burned soft coal, was needed too. The grate was easy to clean out, because soft coal burned to an ash.

The expression “male chauvinism” was unknown at that time, but I can remember my mother saying—“Dorothy, that’s your brother’s chair,” and I willingly gave it up. But both boys were willing to go down to the basement (I think we called it “the cellar”) to tend the furnace and bring up a pail of apples to munch on as we read Jack London’s stories of the Yukon or his **Martin Eden**, which was a man’s struggle to educate himself.

Another book I remember, which led Della and me to take long walks into the west side, was Upton Sinclair’s **The Jungle**, about the stockyard workers.

One more delightful walk, which led us to the end of a carline and out into the prairie, gave us, one afternoon, a glimpse of a bird’s nest, right at our feet, which deluded us into thinking it was a small bouquet of flowers, when it really was the opened beaks of a number of newly hatched birds.

But in thinking of these happy times, I remember, too, how Della used to look at us all, Mother, the boys and I all immersed in our reading, and her saying “Let’s talk.” Our father worked nights.

One difference of opinion between my sister and me came strongly to my mind a few nights ago as I watched, on television, the story of Margaret Sanger. When our family moved from Chicago to New York, my sister, who had chosen to study shorthand and typing, went to work for this crusading woman, and became herself, a rabid, if I can use so sharp a word for a beloved sister, apostle of the spreading of birth control information. Margaret Sanger became something of a martyr and a heroine when she was arrested and given a 30-day sentence on what was then known as Blackwell’s Island, and, since I had a job at this time (my first one after two years in college), I was sent to interview her on her release for the **New York Call**, a Socialist paper.

There were many more morning papers at that time than there are now, and, since there were so many reporters waiting for her, and the authorities not wanting Mrs. Sanger to go through such an ordeal, she was quietly released at a different time and able to get home, where she found only me on hand. I got a good interview, and a bonus from the paper for what was called a “scoop.”

My sister had taken a secretarial course at Eastman’s Business College in Poughkeepsie, which my mother herself had attended as a girl, and went to work for Margaret Sanger, whom she revered as a great pioneer. After Della’s own marriage, she had three beautiful children, and, as she explained to me “We are true believers in planned parenthood, and only had those to whom we could give five years of college, or even more for research.” When she went on to exhort me on another occasion, that I should not urge, as a catholic, Tamar, my daughter, to have so many children, I got up firmly and walked out of the house, whereupon she ran after me weeping, saying “Don’t leave me, don’t leave me. We just won’t talk about it again.” So our friendship continued, and I had many a happy visit with her over all these years, and I shall surely miss her.