

Joan de la Bretonne Faust (1955-2022)

Raymond-Jean Frontain

Can anyone doubt the appropriateness of Joan Faust's final publication being titled "John Donne's (Spiral) Staircase to Heaven"—or that, eager to get there herself, she began her ride westward shortly after correcting the article in page proofs, not staying even to see the piece finally in print? For, as kind and gracious as she invariably was, Joan brooked no delay when there was work to be done. Coming little more than a year after she was diagnosed with a faulty heart valve but appeared to be successfully regulating her condition with medication, Joan's death from complications following surgery to repair an emergency aortic dissection seemed obscenely sudden to friends unless one recalls that, a daily jogger and power walker, Joan wouldn't simply ride to meet her Maker when the time came; she'd run.

Although the Donne Society was forced to share Joan's talents with the Marvell Society and the South-Central Renaissance Conference (where she served as Executive Secretary-Treasurer during a fraught period), Joan Faust was *our* Lady Bountiful. In Fall 2004, when an administrator at the University of Southern Mississippi gave the Donne Society no warning that he was abrogating our contract with the Gulfpark Conference Center, leaving us without a meeting place for our fast-approaching twentieth anniversary conference, it was Joan who came to the rescue, scoping out the facilities at Louisiana State University's Lod and Carol Cook Conference Center as an emergency substitute—a substitute location that's proven so congenial it has remained our home since. The elders among us can recall that after we were exiled from Gulfport, God smote the unrighteous at Southern



Mississippi by sending Hurricane Katrina to level the conference center, leaving standing only the Friendship Oak. Adjusting to our exile in Baton Rouge, however, we found that miraculously we'd brought the Friendship Oak with us in the form of Joan, who proved as nurturing

and steadfast a *locus amoenus* in our new home as we were ever likely to find.

For, from 2005 until our final pre-covid conference in 2020, Joan served as our Local Arrangements coordinator, worrying about the food service, fielding last minute demands from attendees who'd failed earlier to specify their complicated dietary needs, refusing to sit down to enjoy her own meal until she'd negotiated last minute requests with the kitchen, and even then distractedly surveying the room for any hint of dissatisfaction with the menu she'd selected. Every year she carted the necessary AV equipment from her campus in Hammond to Baton Rouge, and assisted speakers with their PowerPoint presentations, in order to save the Donne Society the cost of renting the equipment from the Cook Center. And, those with eyes to see may have observed that over the years Joan never arrived Thursday afternoon in time for the invited address, but always later that evening or early the next morning, because she did not want to cancel class on Thursday afternoon and disenfranchise her students. "Quick, tell me, what have I missed?" was invariably her first question upon arrival.

Acknowledging the multiple copies of the current issue of the *John Donne Journal* that he'd been sent so that family members might enjoy Joan's final appearance in print, Joan's husband Mark commented that "She was always so impressed by her friends in academia (many mentioned in Vol. 36) and was always astounded and grateful that she was accepted by such a prestigious group." How typical of Joan's humility that *she* should have felt honored by *our* approbation. I suspect that Joan's modesty in this regard stemmed in part from the fact that after completing a B.A. in French Education and an M.A. in English, Joan taught high school French and English for ten years before deciding to enter a doctoral program, leaving her with the feeling that she had professional ground to make up. Significantly, a number of her published essays address a broad range of texts—Dante, the York *Crucifixion*, Castiglione, Milton, Monk Lewis, and Oscar Wilde—in pedagogical terms. Joan first presented at the Donne Conference in 1991, a year before she completed her doctorate at LSU; the expanded version of that paper was published as "John Donne's Verse Letters to the Countess of Bedford: Mediators in a Poet-Patroness Relationship" in Volume 12 (1993) of the *JDJ*. In subsequent years Joan chaired or served as respondent for a half dozen panels, but did not present again



Joan Faust at the Marvell Society dinner in 2011.

until 2017, when she delivered the paper that was revised as the article on *Devotions*, which appears in the current issue.

However, it is her essay “Donne on Love: Sometimes the End Just Doesn’t Justify the Means,” which appeared in Summers and Pebworth, eds., *Fault Lines and Controversies in the Study of Seventeenth Century English Literature* (University of Missouri Press, 2002), that suggests the importance that her interest in liminality would have for seventeenth-century studies in general, and Donne and Marvell studies in particular. Dealing with the “irreconcilable planes of thought” to be found in classical and early modern medical, ecclesiastical, and philosophical apprehensions about sexual intercourse, the essay maps the conflicting attitudes towards love found throughout Donne’s canon. The essay anticipates the valuable work she does in her article on sleep tropes in Renaissance culture, and in *Andrew Marvell’s Liminal Lyrics: The Space Between* (University of Delaware Press, 2012), in which she employs Leonardo’s technique of *sfumato*—that is, the deliberate blurring of lines in favor of indeterminate shadows suggesting movement, depth and complexity—as an analogue for Marvell’s turning poetic forms into thresholds and spaces of free signification that solicit the reader’s

participation in an ongoing, never completed conversation. Joan draws upon this same interest in theories of liminality in her final essay on Donne's *Devotions*—an essay which her admirers hoped would be part of the book project on Donne's liminality that Joan did not live to complete.

Joan's ability to live betwixt and between, to live in liminal space, allowed her to be a person of strong faith nonetheless deeply grounded in the material and social spheres. Recalling their shared ministry to their church, her husband Mark has written that

both of our families are strong Roman Catholics. Even before we married she and I agreed to devote as much time as we could to the church. Joan had started in high school by playing guitar for mass with a small group of friends. She loved the music ministry and continued to play after we were married. She played guitar especially for youth and children's mass for years at our Mandeville [Louisiana] parish, Our Lady of the Lake. We were also involved in fund raising, especially the parish festival which we worked for years in leadership positions. She was in various ministries including as a eucharistic minister giving communion at masses and to the homebound. She and I were both lector/commentators at mass and were members of the St. Vincent de Paul Society working with the poor of the parish. In 2005 we received the Order of St. Louis as a couple from the Archdiocese of New Orleans.

But one would never learn of these longstanding commitments or distinguished honor from Joan, who, like St. Charles de Foucauld, preferred to give quiet witness by being.

The Peony Pavilion, Malagar

Publications of Joan Faust

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Joan Faust and Claude J. Summers.