Voices of Sisters
Social Justice



Detail of art by Kaitlyn Speck, age 14 (Courtesy of Margaret Cessna)



by Sr. Margaret Cessna

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September 13, 2023

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Where have all the flowers gone, long time passing?
Where have all the flowers gone, long time ago?

—Pete Seeger

Facebook reminded me that today is Jeannette's birthday. She died a year ago and her Facebook account is still active. The only good news about that is that every year I will be reminded to think about her on her birthday.

Jeannette was my dishwashing partner. It was the '60s, and my first mission after college. The 1962-65 Second Vatican Council had already happened, but last-century rules were still pretty much in place in our local community. We were able to watch TV together — the nightly news with "The Huntley-Brinkley Report" and Disney on Sunday evening. The only exception was the assassination of John F. Kennedy with all the news and the funeral afterward.

Silence rules were still in place. Those seculars were still not allowed past the front doors.

We were high school teachers during those memorable '60s. After school in our classrooms until five o'clock prayer, we "young ones" were often introduced to the current anthems by our savvy students. As a result, part of our formation was the nightly news and the music that was radically new.

After dinner we had 30 minutes of recreation before night prayer, and as the others made their way to the community room, we took up our positions at the kitchen sink. Jeannette and I would hum and sing, softly, the new music with which we had fallen in love: Joan Baez, Judy Collins, Simon and Garfunkel, Pete Seeger, Bob Dylan, the Byrds. In this way, we were involved in a "secondhand" way with the music and behavior of the beatniks and the musicians who were changing the face and the mind and the heart of America.

Eventually, a lot changed for us in community after Vatican II. First habits. Silence rules relaxed. Opportunity to request our mission. Access to a community car for personal reasons. Letters sent without permission. More time at home with family.

It was a whole new experience. A whole new world. We were even given a few dollars every month for essentials. (Baskin-Robbins was just down the street and for

some an occasional hot fudge sundae was considered essential.)

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As I move into the golden years and think back, it is clear to me that I was formed in mind and soul pretty much by the '60s. (I always wanted a necklace of puka beads. Never happened. Too late now.)

As young teens — as children, really — these students of ours witnessed the deaths of John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. They grieved mightily and shed tears without shame. And for the rest of their days with us, they wondered why.

They were filled with moral outrage that grew into moral courage. By the end of the decade, they were in college. Dodging the draft. Civil disobedience. Protests. Marching. Always marching. Still singing. They found a sense of belonging with those who sang and marched with them. Together, they were instrumental in ending the war in Vietnam.

The energy and conviction of those students during the entire decade were palpable. They were rising up. They will change the world, we thought, as we cheered them on.

They're probably all grandparents now — and I wonder if they cheered their children and now their grandchildren on as they take their turn at being shocked by war, racism, violence and political division. Do these generations even know that the flowers are gone? Is change still "blowin' in the wind?" Is the "eve of destruction" still just around the corner? Are the "words of the prophets" still "written on the subway walls and tenement halls"?

Considering the span of all time, we did not arrive on this planet that long ago. It took us a while to put our home in danger. Healing won't take place in a flash. But with each new generation there is hope, not despair. Slow but sure.

I don't think it's crazy to rely on youth to lead us. John Lewis was 25 when he was severely beaten on Bloody Sunday as he crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge marching for civil rights. Malala Yousafzai, a Pakistani female education activist was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize at age 17. Amanda Gorman at age 22 read her

poetry at the Biden inauguration. Maxwell Frost at age 25 was elected to Congress in 2022. Sally Ride was 32 years old as the first American woman to fly in space. Duly elected Tennessee State Reps. Justin Jones, age 27, and Justin Pearson, age 29, were expelled from the Tennessee House as they protested in favor of gun control. Their action has vigorously energized young voters of all races.

And Jesus himself changed the world at age 33.

The anthems have changed. But youthful energy permeates every generation before it wanes into adulthood. The voices and spirit of Martin Luther King Jr. and Bobby Kennedy always seem to find a home in this energy. Tiny steps to freedom and inclusion. Each decade a little more. Until hopefully, one day, somewhere in the future there will be peace on Earth and goodwill toward all.

When the flowers will bloom once again.