

People Who Influenced My Life and Values

by Virginia Lynch Graf

My parents, Walter and Dolores Lynch, certainly weren't perfect, but they were playful and filled with love for each other and their eight children. They never had much money, but I never felt poor. They took pride in what we did, and encouraged us to stand on our own two feet. I remember that for any special occasion, Mom always wore the same green dress, and Dad the same gray suit, but I never heard them complain.

The first time I saw a photo of Anne Frank and read her diary, I was immediately drawn to her. She reminded me both in appearance and disposition of my late sister, Dolores. Anne loved life, and so did Lorsey. Anne was confined by hatred; Lorsey by cancer. Both of them believed in the goodness of other human beings, and never lost that feeling. Their lives inspired me to love life, and to make the most of each day I'm given.

Dorothy Day spent most of her adult life working among the poor and destitute in New York City. She was a journalist who started *The Catholic Worker*, a newspaper and an organization devoted to raising the consciousness of people around the country to the plight of the poor. From my early school days, I fancied myself a writer and felt called to serve the poor. Dorothy Day validates what I have done and do.

Mother Jones was a real hero to miners, children, and factory workers caught in the exploitation of the Industrial Age. An Irish woman of courage and determination to make life better for others, she shares more than my ancestry. She had passion! Reading about so many of her antics, I was struck by her courage and compassion. I also enjoyed her humor. One time she reminded her listeners that while it was good to pray for the dead, it was imperative to work like hell for the living! She is one of labor's real heroes! My dad was always proud of the fact that as a railroad worker, he was chosen by his fellow laborers to be their spokesperson. I didn't learn that until I was an adult and Dad was reminiscing. I felt proud of him too.

While pursuing my Master's degree, I came across the beautiful person of Irenaeus. He wrote: "The glory of God is man and woman fully alive!" He stood against the popular teaching of his day that the body was bad and only the spirit good. Even today, you hear negative teaching about women, or about this life as a somehow an inferior and secondary existence. Irenaeus didn't see life that way! Despite the fact that he lived around 130-200 A.D., he was a man ahead of his time who believed in equality. Irenaeus also knew the value of compromise, another important idea. Instead of arguing over a fixed date for Easter, he suggested a moveable feast — still in effect today.

Chief Seattle, for whom the city in Washington is named, chose peace and life for his people over war and struggles for ancestral lands. Just like Chief Joseph, another great Native American, he suffered immensely from dealing with white settlers and the US concept of "manifest destiny." Both men could have stirred their people to war, but they knew that war extracts bloodshed, misery, and hatred. These wise heroes recognized that war generates war, never lasting peace.

My life has been one of activity for social justice. There is no doubt that I was led to such a lifestyle as I became aware of other men and women who chose activism. Some of them were born to privilege. Some were able to rise out of their struggles to a more settled life. What they had in common was their inability to watch others suffer. Each of them walked back to those in need. I feel privileged to walk in my own way with such moral giants as Elizabeth of Portugal, Francis of Assisi, Henry David Thoreau, Mohandas Gandhi, Harriet Tubman, Mother Katherine Drexel, Cesar Chavez, Dr. Martin Luther King, and Mother Teresa. Vision, hope and determination to make things better for others, not counting the cost to do so, make them sterling heroes and heroines.