

These are the words I was privileged to share at Maureen's memorial gathering on May 20 2017...

*I met Maureen in the spring of 1985, when I was 24 years old. She had come to meet with the owner of Lakewood Avenue Children's School, where I would soon begin my life as a preschool teacher. I was there for that meeting because Maureen was bringing along a chatty and charming little guy named Will who would become one of my first students. Will and I explored the under-construction playground, including the gigantic digger he immediately christened a "snort," while the owner spoke with Maureen about what this school-to-be would look like and, luckily for me, persuaded her to sign up.*

*Obviously, I fell completely in love with Will that day, but in truth, I think I was also beginning to fall in love with his family. I was so young and so new to my work in early childhood; I didn't really know much about teaching yet, and I certainly didn't know anything about parenting. But it's what they say about art: "I'll know what I like when I see it."*

*There was something about Maureen's easy way with her little boy - and about his certainty that the world would be a welcoming and interesting place - that opened the door to possibilities I had never really let myself imagine. When I met Maureen, I was meeting both the Mom I'd always wanted to have, and the Mom I was hoping I would someday be.*

*And so began thirty years of relationship that slowly evolved from hero-worship and mentoring to friendship and collaboration and deep mutual care. A friendship that felt like one long conversation, most often about the six children we loved in common, the six dear names that were the subject lines of our regular walking and lunchtime conversations - Emily, Will, Alex. Cara, Anna, Josh.*

*Maureen and I had a way of working through that list, settling on the child whose triumphs or challenges or losses had a particular hold on our hearts in that moment. There's a natural but sometimes disabling insanity that comes with loving our children, and mine owe Maureen a deep debt of gratitude for keeping me more or less on the rails.*

*She was a Mom who loved her children without reserve and who saw them with a gentle and uncompromising clarity; in her eyes, they were endlessly interesting and perfectly imperfect. That clarity was possible because she parented with such humility and self-awareness. Because Maureen was ruthless about interrogating her own part in those relationships, she was able to achieve what too few of us can - that balance of closeness and distance that allowed her to see her children, as Rilke would say, "whole against the sky." And one of her great gifts to me is that she saw me that way, too.*

*When I left Lakewood after three years, feeling discouraged about the prospect of finding a place to teach that felt true to my ideals, it was Maureen who gently but relentlessly turned me toward what she knew was in my heart, and what she believed was possible. She would get me talking about the kids I had taught and what I loved about each of them. She would say things like, "Remember how sweet it was to sit on the deck at the end of the day and talk while we watched the kids play?"*

*And she kept me close to the community of families that she had helped to bring together during those years, families who continued to gather for meals and playdates and camping trips. Camping, by the way, was another thing that Maureen convinced me I would love, and taught me how to do.*

*And eventually, Maureen's encouragement became a stronger force than my own discouragement, and I began thinking seriously about starting a small non-profit school that would put "children first." When our little community of families gathered for an Easter weekend camping trip, I was already deep into mapping the two-year timeline for buying property, hiring teachers, and getting licensed. It was late; the kids were all asleep in the tents; there was a campfire and dessert and lots of wine; and Maureen had an idea. "John!" she said. "While Donna is looking for a place to buy, how about she just starts the school in our basement?" John was, wisely, quiet. I, however, was not. I thought of the two story solar house that Kevin and I had been living in for less than a year, and said, "Kevin! We could do that in our downstairs!" Kevin, too, was quiet - but within hours of getting home the next night I had run the numbers and talked it over with Kevin, and we had a plan for opening Children First, the one year version. Many of you know that the one year version became a school that is now 26 years old.*

*In many ways, Children First was another beloved child that Maureen and I shared in common, one we birthed and grew together. Over the years, she witnessed my teaching life with a mix of curiosity, warmth and confidence that sustained me when things were hard and brought me so much joy about the things that were going well.*

*Just nine days before she died, we had plans for lunch. I was feeling swamped as usual - she was always very patient with me about that - so she made my favorite deviled eggs and we found a picnic table in a quiet little park. While we ate, I told her about something new I'd just tried at school, a celebration of kids' storytelling that involved making their stories into simple plays, then casting friends and parents, and performing the plays in front of the whole community. It was a powerful experience for me, and at this lunch, I gave myself permission to bask in Maureen's genuine and seemingly tireless interest in my work. For over an hour, I talked about each of the Children Firsters, and shared my analysis of their stories, and explained in great detail how we went about acting them. ... and Maureen got it all. She laughed and asked questions, and helped me see new connections - and then she thanked me for, as she put it, "bringing her into my world". She THANKED me for that. I sure hope I thanked her, too.*

*It does seem fitting that one of my last long conversations with Maureen centered on stories, because that was another passion we held in common. It was probably late in 2005 when Maureen first mentioned her idea for bringing together a small group of women who love good food and good books, and it was in February of 2006 when the six of us gathered for the first time in Maureen's kitchen to enjoy her superlative cooking and choose our first read, Marilynne Robinson's beautiful novel "Gilead." Today is a good day to remember my favorite line from that book: "There are a thousand thousand reasons to live this life, every one of them sufficient." Maureen understood that, for sure.*

*She chose that first book, and she chose the very last one we read together, too - "Lab Girl," the wonderful memoir by botanist Hope Jahren. Maureen was reading it early, so I could borrow her copy when she done. After she died, Emily found the book and brought it to me. Knowing how much Maureen had liked it, I read it with heightened attention, constantly aware that only a short time ago she had been turning the same pages, and thinking about the same events and personalities and turns of phrase.*

*I was both eager to finish the book and desperate to make it last. The night before our book group met, I had about fifty pages to go. I'd come to the part where Jahren is finally giving birth. Her labor stalls, and she's struggling. Her doctor suggests a shift in strategy, and Jahren makes a little joke, and the doctor acknowledges her effort with a smile. It is here that Maureen has marked a passage - the only mark she made in the book. My hands trembled a bit as I read and re-read the words that Maureen has now brought to my attention: "The smile that she gives me," Jahren writes, "is like a hundred-dollar bill that I can stuff into the pocket of my heart."*

*Of course, I think. Maureen has given me so many of those smiles. My heart is stuffed full of her hundred dollar bills. I just have to remember they are there, and spend them freely, creating more of the love that she so freely gave to me.*

*I'm aware as I speak these words that are meant to be about Maureen, that I am really telling MY story, a story she shaped in subtle and not-so-subtle ways. And maybe you have been having the same experience as you think about the Maureen you loved - and maybe that's because her way of loving us grew from a habit of foregrounding others, and privileging their stories. I think she liked being your Maureen and your Maureen and my Maureen. As we each remember our own Maureen, I hope that each of us will find -and help each other find -the pockets in our hearts where those hundred dollar bills are safely stashed away.*

Every donation to Children First in honor of Maureen has filled a pocket in my heart, in part because I am so grateful that we will be able to build something here - something beautiful and lasting - a place where Maureen's name will be written in remembrance, and a place where families who are part of Children First will be able to "practice community" in her spirit.