Response to the CATE 2017 Classroom Excellence Award

(My response on learning I got the award) It was a delightful surprise, humbling and a great honor.

My gratitude to the CATE Board and everyone connected to the Classroom Excellence Award, to all who wrote letters of support for me, to all my colleagues in the English Department at San José State – especially my Dept. chair Shannon Miller (who actually couldn’t make it since she lives in Felton, the mudslide area), Jen Johnson, and Jonathan Lovell – who so many of you here at CATE know from his over 30 years of directing the SJAWP (San Jose Area Writing Project) and working tirelessly for ELA in CA; thanks to my students from the 42 years I’ve been teaching English, but specifically all the English cred grads from 2006 to the present – one of my greatest joys is preparing and supporting future teachers of ELA. Finally, as some of you know I am a Catholic nun, a member of the School Sisters of Notre Dame – a teaching congregation – and I thank the SSNDs for fostering my gifts as an educator.

This brings me to the two themes that underlie my teaching philosophy: from *The Little Prince*: “It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye” and from the Gospel of Matthew (my “translation” of the 10:8) “the gift you have received, give as gift.”

I am very much a “heart person”; I rate compassion as an essential for teachers. With a heart attuned to others’ stories, that sees other perspectives, I learn/ I wager teachers learn important stories. My students’ stories challenge me to find literature that touches their lives, that move them to hear others’ stories, and gives them a better sense of our common humanity.

As Ken Donelson, co-author of *Literature for Today’s Young Adults* says about the gift of teaching literature: “The authors we read and think about and worry about and doubt become a part of us as we become part of them. If literature doesn’t become part of our hearts and our guts and the guts and the hearts of our students, then what is it good for? And that is our responsibility and our joy, to know so many different books and stories and poems and to present them so that young people will take some of them in and become wiser and nobler people because of the literature and us.”

May our hearts in seeing what’s essential continue to gift our students with the welcome and openness so needed.

And because I’ve been known to “burst into song” when I teach, I close with this…

We are pilgrims on a journey/

We are travelers on the road/

We are here to help each other

Walk the mile and bear the load. (from “The Servant Song” by Richard

Gillard)

Thank you!