

Saint John's Abbey and its sister community Saint Benedict's are in central Minnesota – a part of the world I would once have imagined as the middle of nowhere. These Benedictines were, after my heart, contemplative and industrious at once. *Ora et Labore* is their motto – worship and work, simultaneous and inextricable. They live and teach and publish and pray on prairie their German forebears settled in 1856 in the midst of a devastating plague of grasshoppers. They take great pride in the fact that their order began in the 6th Century, pre-dating the major divisions of the Church, and they draw ethical sustenance from a generous, sacred, not quite linear view of time. I emerged from divinity school with a sense of the vastness and relevance of the theological enterprise – the human search for words about God, and lives crafted in their resonance. But I could not find these aspects of religion visible in our public life. I could not find a way to trace their imprint until I fell down Collegeville's contemplative rabbit hole.

In the decade of my birth, the 1960s, while political America was protesting, loving not warring, warring not winning, dreaming spaceships, grieving, these monks were building. They lent creative genius to the liturgical renewal of the Roman Catholic Church before and after Vatican II, of which word had not reached my Southern Baptist childhood. They built a manuscript library that is becoming the world's greatest repository of formerly buried monastic treasures, now catalogued in microfiche and digital for present and future generations. As it happens, Collegeville was also the birthplace in 1967 of my current employer, Minnesota Public Radio/American Public Media, which became a media phenomenon with a talent of comic brilliance, Garrison Keillor, and an entrepreneurial leader, a Saint John's alum named Bill Kling. But I first came under the

spell of another, less media-savvy Saint John's progeny, a place of ecumenical conversation and research now called the Collegeville Institute. It remains small and quiet by choice, and has done mighty works in the world.

In 1995, I first spent a summer week at the Institute. With 14 soon-beloved strangers, I sat around a plain round conference table that I came to imagine as a rival, or at least a counterpart, to those self-important strategic conference tables of Berlin. Here, life and death, mystery and meaning, were on the table. We engaged in a simple, life-changing exercise of reflecting on theological questions by looking back at our lives. That can sound reductive, and strictly personal. But time and space become more generous when we explore ultimate truths in the presence of others. Thin places open up. This experience is had in churches and synagogues and mosques and temples all the time. It happens among friends and in marriages and at hospital bedsides. We make the discovery that when we are honest and vivid and particular in describing what is most personal and important in life, we can summon universal and redemptive places at the very edge of words. In Collegeville we did so in the act of engaging religious difference.

It's easy to forget these days that different kinds of Christians were at each other's throats in the name of piety for centuries. Islam is 700 years younger than Christianity, and roughly 700 years ago Christians were burning heretics at the stake, staging bloody inquisitions, and waging global holy wars. As late as the mid-1800's in the United States, there were outbreaks of Protestant mob violence against Catholics, with churches and entire neighborhoods burned. In this sermon from 1911, at the Cathedral of St. John

the Divine – now a famously liberal congregation - the preacher mixed the virtue of separation of church and state, as was common then, with anti-Catholic rhetoric:

We must fight to keep church and state forever separated. We must fight for our public schools, against the machinations of an Italian hierarchy that is today endeavoring to undermine and destroy them. Before it is too late and the hordes of Europe and Asia have engulfed us, let us arise and fight for Anglo-Saxon freedom and Anglo-Saxon discipline, for Almighty God who is still for us.

And through the first half of the 20th Century, most small American towns had virtual walls of religious segregation – not just Catholic churches and Protestant churches but Catholic pharmacies and Protestant pharmacies. Not to mention Catholic schools, because in earlier times in our great republic Protestant legislators – that is to say, majority mainstream Americans – forbade Catholics from teaching in public schools in the name of separation of church and state. Protestants were free citizens and democrats, the reasoning went as in the sermon above, but Catholics would ineluctably be governed by the long hand of the Vatican. Meanwhile within Protestantism itself across the centuries, other divisions flourished byzantine and deep. Calvinist and Lutheran and Anglican were not mere theological digressions but different ways of seeing the world. The splinters that came later – from Anabaptist to Mennonite to Holiness to Pentecostal – complicated matters further. Growing up in the 1950's, my mother was forbidden by her father to date the boy next door because he was Methodist. Thirty years and a far more tolerant world later, dear reader, she married him.

So religion has always been a volatile aspect of human life, even in the land of the free and the brave – because it has always been a container for more than itself. It has always become intertwined with that fraught human experience of identity. But progress is possible. As we agonize over inter-religious hostility in the early 21st Century world, we might take note of the general rapprochement that has eventually taken hold between different kinds of Christians. Most Americans may not be card-carrying members of the National Council of Churches, but the idea of outright hostility between Protestants and Catholics as a cultural norm appears ludicrous. The battle lines that bloodlessly but bitterly divided families and communities is unimaginable. It is for the young as incomprehensible as the Berlin Wall sounded to my daughter as we stood at the open Brandenburg Gate just a decade after the wall had fallen. Cars and bicycles drove past us between what had once been east and west and was now the free, vigorous heart of the city. I told her about the no-man's land this had been in the Berlin I inhabited, about the watch towers that had stood between the columns, the tank traps and barbed wire and attack dogs and guards with guns. She looked at me finally like I was delusional, and smiled forgivingly as she said, “Mom, I don't think they really had guns.” In Collegeville, I began to internalize the Benedictines long, wise perspective on history – how bewildering and distracting its immediate lessons can be. They helped me grasp that when I say I sat around a table in Collegeville where Armenian Orthodox and Nazarene Holiness and Roman Catholic were gathered companionably together, that is saying something.

And as the people around that table opened up one by one, taking their time and telling their stories, doctrine and tradition and religious history came alive before me. Our conversation of six days began with an intense, delightful, Armenian Orthodox scholar who began his personal history 600 years in the past, with the assassination of an ancestor who was a bishop. His fierce modern struggle for faith still found its source and counterweight in that drama. One of our moderators was a Roman Catholic woman whose parents were Catholic intellectuals and writers. As the Second Vatican Council drew all the Catholic world to Rome for four years, she passed around canapes to her parents and their friends and inhaled the vast excitement and promise of that event. I imagine her as a girl hearing the dramatic statement of the council's convener, Pope John Paul XXIII, that he intended "to shake off the dust that has collected on the throne of St. Peter since the time of Constantine, and let in some fresh air." She has devoted the rest of her life to dialogue between the Catholic church and other traditions, dialogue that happens softly on the sidelines of world events but grows ever more critical in an interconnected world.

The funniest man around our table of often earnest, often intimate, discussion was a Nazarene Holiness church historian named Paul Bassett. He had been captured as a young scholar by the history of Iberian Christianity, the middle ages of Spain and Portugal, and so he became an expert on Christianity hundreds of years before his own tradition was born on the American frontier. People in his church ask him all the time, he says with amusement but not a hint of derision, when "real Christians" got to that part of the world. "I have to tell them," he says, "that those were real Christians there all along,

and that's why the grace of forgiveness is so important." I had always thought of Holiness preachers as crazy snake handlers. But from Paul Bassett I first learned that the original Holiness pioneers were renegade Methodists who broke from churches they felt had grown materialistic and formalistic and cold. They were abolitionists. The historic Seneca Falls meeting on women's suffrage was held in a Holiness church. The Salvation Army emerged from the Holiness Movement. This stranger of great warmth and dignity loved his church and I could see why. I felt that Paul Bassett might be a vision of the kind of Christian my grandfather could have been with a little more education – learned and passionately faithful and humble, with an endearing edge of wit. I have to stop myself from writing this book for him.

In 1995, I was engaged to conduct an oral history of the Institute. With its then-director Patrick Henry, a man of immense energy and a large and generous intelligence, I drew up a list of 55 people whose lives and thought had intersected with the Collegeville institute. This journey of conversation lasted for two years, and took me to both coasts as well as Atlanta, Chicago, and Rome. My conversation partners were lay and ordained, and some of them were among the great Christian thinkers of the 20th Century. They included the Yale historian Jaroslav Pelikan; the late great liberation theologian Robert McAfee Brown; the Evangelical philosopher Richard Mouw; the biblical scholar and later the first African-American president of the National Council of Churches, Bishop Thomas Hoyt Jr.; and the prolific author and political activist Sr. Joan Chittister. They were all my teachers. And as different as they could be, there were recurring qualities in these people, constants that I came to associate with God and that I have continued to find as I have

continued such conversations with people across the world's traditions: thoughtfulness, humility, a sense of humor and an openness to being surprised. Patrick Henry, who wrote a vibrant book called *An Ironic Christian's Companion*, always puts "a sense of irony" on his list of common qualities of great lived theology; I'll include that too.

In all of my non-religious years in Europe, I had eschewed cathedrals and religious capitals. I had been to Florence and Venice but never to Rome. Now I spent five days there, in hours and hours of conversation with a Paulist priest, Tom Stransky. He had been Pope John XXIII's liaison to non-Catholic observers of Vatican II, and had later headed the Paulist order. Now he was running the Tantur ecumenical Institute on the road between Jerusalem and Bethlehem, bringing Christians, Muslims, and Jews to speak together in the place in the world where their kinship was most obvious and also most prone to violence. Tom Stransky is an eccentric genius, and although I tend towards awe and affection at the good minds of others, I don't use that word lightly. He told me over one of our delicious dinners that week in Rome, after our interview for the day had finished, that he had published several works of poetry and fiction under a pseudonym. For all I know he has a double life as J.D. Salinger.

But in our formal interviews he also revealed to me the secrets of the Collegeville approach to conversation that had changed so many lives and was about to change mine. They call it the "first person" approach – and that became the title of one of the early incarnations of my radio show. But that is too simple, nor did it work as a radio title.

The first person approach to religious speech is essentially about humanizing doctrine. It disallows abstractions about God, even as it takes account of the fact that it is hard, and so intimate, to speak about this aspect of life directly. The Quaker author Parker Palmer likens the nature of the soul to a wild animal deep in the woods of our psyche which, if approached brusquely or cross-examined will simply run away. We have to create quiet, inviting and trustworthy spaces, Parker says, to keep the insights and presence of soul at the table. And we put words around what the soul knows, Stransky told me, not through what we *think*, but through who we *are*, through the story of our lives.

There is a term, “narrative theology,” that also describes what the first person approach elicits. St. Augustine’s *Confessions*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s *Letters and Papers from Prison*; Sr. Helen Prejean’s *Dead Man Walking* – these are vivid and persuasive theological tracts, because they present religious ideas as forged and expressed in the language of life, of reality in the raw. Anne Lamott’s salty religious memoirs are among the many lively contemporary examples. The Benedictines and their constellation of friends gave a new credence and context to my inborn, ingrained drive to be effective, pragmatic, real. But they changed my vision about that and taught me a whole new set of intellectual and creative tools to turn that vision into something useful for myself and others. From them I inherited the notion that everyone has relevant observations to make about the nature of God and ultimate things – that the raw material of our lives is stuff of which we construct our sensibility of meaning and purpose in this life, of how the divine intersects or interacts with our lives, of what it means to be human. I believe this with all of my heart, and I believe that we have too often diminished and narrowed the parameters

of this quest. We've made it heady or emotional and neglected to take seriously the flawed, mundane physicality, the mess as well as the mystery, of the raw materials with which we are dealing.

And as I began to talk and travel for the oral history project, I conducted it in this spirit. I did not invite people of faith to pronounce. I asked them to trace the intersection of religious ideas with time and space and the color and complexity of real lives - not just the trajectory of their lives, but what they knew of the world, the work they did, who and what they loved. This both grounded and exalted what they had to say, and it let me in. I was most surprised at first by how listenable these conversations were, in dramatic contrast to the strident religious language of our public life. There is a profound difference between hearing someone say, this is *the* truth, and hearing someone say, this is *my* truth. You can disagree with another person's opinions; you can disagree with their doctrines; you can't disagree with their experience. What I heard invariably shed some light on experience of mine, or lit up some corner of another faith that had been closed to me, mysterious and even forbidding. I could never again dismiss one of those traditions of my conversation partners wholesale, because it now carried the integrity of a particular life, a particular voice. People tell me that this is the effect of listening to the far-flung perspectives of *Speaking of Faith*, and this delights me.

My apartment-mate that first summer in Collegeville was the earthy theologian Roberta Bondi. I would interview her a year later at her home in Atlanta. When I met Roberta, she had just completed her wonderful theological autobiography, *Memories of God*. She taught me to approach my conversational theological premise - that we all come to

understand God through the stories of our lives - in all its complexity. We confuse our heavenly father with our earthly father when we are children, Roberta notes, and this is a double edged sword. Like me, she had grown up craving the love of an emotionally distant father and fearing the short-tempered God she had come to know in the tent revivals of her childhood. She became an atheist and an academic, a scholar of semitic languages. One day surrounded by ancient texts in the British Library, she began to read an obscure 6th Century text by a long-forgotten mystic, Philoxenus of Mabug, that spoke to her off the page. Through this dusty text, she told me, she encountered “a God who really was a God.” She came to understand that God looks on us with a kindness and generosity and a sense of all the things we carry in our lives. This God, she told me, sees us with a great deal more allowance for our humanity than we ever make for each other or for ourselves. In all of my thinking and studying up to then, I had not dared to imagine a God with such softness towards me.

Following this discovery, Roberta took the Desert Fathers and Mothers of the earliest church as her companions across time and space, her mentors in prayer. In the 4th, 5th and 6th Centuries, they started a minor cultural upheaval by retreating to empty spaces in search of God. Roman civilization was crumbling around them. They literally decamped to the deserts of Egypt and Syria and took up residence in caves and crags of mountain and the open air. The Church, they felt, had been corrupted by its own success.

Politicians and poets, military officers and mothers followed them for prayers, advice, and meaning. I have come to think of the Desert Fathers and Mothers as Christianity’s first psychotherapists as well as mystics. They were early seekers of the Christian empire, out

to demystify and recover the essence of religious teachings grown cold. In these lives of faith led in the light of ancient traditions, I again felt time acting more like a circle than a line. In the preface to her lovely book *Memories of God*, there is a paragraph that describes the frame of mind with which I embarked on this odyssey through the Christian landscape at the end of one century, and the method I would adapt for radio journalism across traditions at the beginning of the next:

At Collegeville, I finally accepted that the theological work of telling one another our stories, or talking about the ways in which our concrete and particular experiences intersected with the great Christian doctrines was not private work, or work done on behalf of each of us as individuals. It was a common work, real theology, done in order to find a way to claim for our own time and our own generation what it means to be Christian.

Before I completed the journey Collegeville sent me on, I interviewed an extraordinary monk of St. John's, Godfrey Diekmann, a giant of liturgical reform before and after Vatican II. All the way through my project I had collected stories from luminaries and lay people whose most vivid and beloved memories of Collegeville had to do with picking mushrooms with Godfrey. By the time I met Godfrey the year before his death he was in his 90's and frail, no longer foraging for mushrooms nor openly changing the life of the Church. But he was luminous. When I interviewed Studs Terkel at 93, I was reminded of Godfrey, though Studs calls himself an agnostic, which he defines with a smile as "a cowardly atheist." Like Godfrey he glowed with a life well lived, a life defined by words well chosen, by grand ideas elicited as well as offered, and by a web of life-giving relationship. Studs Terkel and Godfrey Dieckmann look alike in my mind's

eye: gray haired and flush-faced, large and generous and full of light even as their bodies were traveling the end stretch of incarnation.

It was amazing to sit with Godfrey and hear his stories. They tumbled out of him, faster than my transcriber, later, could type. One of them, deeply moving, is of a gathering at Yale of scholars working on the first cross-denominational Christian translation of the Bible. Someone suggested that they say a prayer to begin; but how to do that in a nonsectarian way? And who would lead? These were still awkward questions in the world just a few decades ago. A responsible committee, they turned to the Lord's Prayer, a petition straight from the Bible that Christians had been praying longer than the men in that room and their churches had been divided. And as Godfrey describes it, as they began to recite words they all knew by heart in unison, their eyes filled with tears at the simplicity and the enormity of that act of common prayer. Godfrey described that moment as riveting, as they all realized for the first time – truly realized – that this text that preceded their divisions and also transcended them in the most elemental way.

The longer he lives and loves and prays, Godfrey tells me before I go, with some urgency, the more he believes that Christianity needs a renewed *incarnational* theology – a back to basics understanding of the implications of belief in a God who threw himself whole into the light and darkness of life with us. “All of creation in itself,” he tells me, “has a certain dignity, a certain reality as the image of God's greatness and beauty and strength. But we have failed to see things. We have failed to hear things.”

Godfrey's mushrooms, I understood after I finally met him, were the perfect metaphor for his theology: a common slogging through beauty, getting rained on, getting dirty, taking in the fields' and forests' silent declaration of God, anticipating the delicious meal to come. This theology infused his understanding of doctrine, faith, and worship – not isolated ritual but an expression of the eternal in the concrete: muddy, of the earth, alive.