

A Walk in the Forest: Reflections on the Collegeville Institute

Near the end of my time at the Collegeville Institute, I took a walk through the forest here, a forest coming alive during the season of Easter, resurrecting from what was considered a mild winter by Minnesota standards. As I walked, the air singing with freshness, the sun sparkling on the waters of Lake Stumpf, I pondered my sabbatical time here and all it had meant to me. Had it been all that I had hoped it would be? As an Australian and a Benedictine sister of the Good Samaritan Congregation, I had travelled a long way to take this precious break from my ordered life of demanding schedules and constant deadlines. Had I come to the right place in order to achieve my goals of having a time for renewal, refreshment, and refocus?

It was not difficult for me to answer my questions. As warm gentle breezes brushed gently over my skin, I thought of the many aspects of my time here that have stimulated not only my mind but also my imagination, fortified my commitments and hopes for the future, and generally enriched the fabric of my life on so many levels. As I listened to the intermittent hammering of the woodpecker - not a familiar sound in my ears - it seemed to me that the Collegeville Institute had given to me three distinctive and precious gifts.

Firstly: The gift of space and time and silence. As I spied a loon's nest hidden safely within some nearby reeds, I realized I've been given space, time, and silence to be with myself, my thoughts, and my God amid the changing beauty of this place. In this space, this silence and this time, I too had changed. I had been enabled to hear the voice from deep within me speak. It spoke of ideas, dreams, and hopes that lay latent within me. This space, this silence and this time, awoke my imagination and as, from the passing dark of winter, had been enabled to blossom forth in the sunshine that is the Collegeville Institute.

Secondly: The gift of encouragement and fellowship. I stopped at the bridge that spans Lake Stumpf and looked back across the reflective waters towards the Institute apartments. I thought of all that had been shared there among the scholars who had travelled with me during these days. Together we delighted in a theology of play and rejoiced in the imaginative creation of a saintly woman's life. We journeyed along a spirituality from ego to self. We ached for the plight of Palestinian Christians and struggled with the concepts of depression and salvation. We pondered the nature of evil and its force within the human heart. We talked of the God of silence and the silence of God. We watched as ice and leaves were woven together into patterns of meaning by the artist in residence, and listened to the voices of a variety of traditions from across the Globe: the Congo, Singapore, Trinidad, Canada, England, Australia, and throughout the USA. And there was renewal not only in the leaves but in our hearts and minds!

Thirdly: The gift of opportunity and friendship. Across the bridge and up the steep hill, I found myself on the grounds of Saint John's University proper, its gardens amass with the heady smell of pink, mauve, purple and white lilac bushes, and a carpet of plum blossom laid out before me. Here opportunity abounds, choral concerts, piano recitals, hymn fests, plays and movie nights, lectures from creative minds, luncheons with the School of Theology and Seminary - never a dull moment.

Though alone on my walk by design, enjoying the peace and tranquility of nature's creative energy, I have roamed this time here at the Institute with others. At table and at prayer we have formed a communion of One Body, One Blood in our One God. We have taken, blest, broken and received each other's lives in the sharing of our writing, in our conversations, our laughter, our songs, our joys, and our tears. We have learned something of each other's hopes and dreams and gone our separate ways with full hearts and deep friendships.

My reflective walk through the forest ends at the Abbey Church. Here I have prayed and lifted my heart in worship with others who also long for the fullness of the resurrection in their own lives and in the life of the world. It is here that I stop and give God grateful thanks and praise for this time, for this rest, for the gifts that come from a sabbatical at the Collegeville Institute.