

Speech at 50th Anniversary of the Collegeville Institute, April 2017

By Kathleen Norris

The invitation to speak at the Collegeville Institute's 50th anniversary is a great honor, and also a welcome chance to visit St. John's, where I've spent so much time -- not only at the Institute, but on the boards of the University and the School of Theology. The St. John's monks have a noble history of nurturing bold programs -- the Liturgical Press, Minnesota Public Radio, the Hill Library, the St. John's Bible, and, of course, the Institute. It was radical, in the 1950s, for the university to add a course on Protestant theology, and even bolder for the abbey to send a monk, Fr. Kilian, to Europe to study Protestant theology. Fifty years ago, it was just plain wild to establish, on Roman Catholic ground, a venue for ecumenical dialogue. To give you some context: my husband David graduated from Regis, a Jesuit high school in New York City, in 1962. One of his classmates wanted to apply to Harvard but the school refused to send his transcripts, because Harvard was not a Catholic institution.

His friend was able to go to Harvard, but this gives you some idea of the attitudes at the time. Catholics have often been put on the defensive in America. Nowadays it's easy to forget that anti-Catholicism has long been a part of American society. Early in the 20th century the Ku Klux Klan was active in both Dakotas and, I assume, Minnesota, as an anti-Catholic organization. In the 1920s, in western South Dakota, when my maternal grandfather, a physician (and nominal Presbyterian), refused to join the Klan, he was nicknamed "Pope Totten." I stand here today as the proud grand-daughter of a pope.

I come by my ecumenism honestly. When I was six months old and critically ill in a Catholic hospital in Washington DC, I suspect that one of the nuns baptized me in secret. My paternal grandfather, a Methodist pastor, officially baptized me a year later. I was raised in Methodist or Congregational churches, wherever my father could get a job as a choir director. Currently -- although I'm not sure this is allowed -- I'm a member of a Presbyterian Church in Lemmon, South Dakota, and an Episcopal parish in Honolulu. I've been a Benedictine oblate since 1987. It all works for me, which I suppose makes me a religious proponent of what the poet John Keats' termed "negative capability...when a person is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, and doubts, without an irritable reaching after fact and reason."

I first heard of what was then the Ecumenical Institute at the 1990 convention of the American Benedictine Academy, when Patrick Henry, a speaker at the event, provided me with a brochure and encouraged me to apply for a residency. Fortunately I had a Bush Foundation grant for writing that allowed me to come. My application to the Institute was for a book about religious language -- but that's not what I worked on when

I came. In my experience a blessed diversion often takes hold when people come to the Institute: the atmosphere at St. Johns -- which people commonly describe as “magical” - encourages them to embark on projects that they never anticipated. One friend I made at the Institute, the Dominican Paul Philibert, had applied to work on a book about moral development in children, but after visiting with Frank Kaczmarcik and viewing his woodcuts he was so inspired that he began writing a visual and literary catechesis, an exploration of the meaning of Christian symbols, based on Frank’s images. It became a beautiful book, *Seeing and Believing*, published by the Liturgical Press. As for myself, during one semester when I was supposed to be writing prose, I worked full-time on a number of poems, most of which were directly inspired by the daily liturgy in the abbey church.

When I was at the Institute I was grateful for access to the Alcuin Library collection, but always considered my main research to be attending the liturgy of the hours. I trusted that just being in this place, with the liturgy as a kind of scaffolding, would foster my writing. And I was right. When I initially came here I was working on my first prose book, *Dakota*. It was accepted by a publisher in the fall of my residency, and in late May, when I was still busy with revisions as other residents were packing up their studies, I got a lot of good-natured ribbing about how I should tell my editor to lay off!

Dakota was an unexpected success, and after all the hoopla that surrounds a best-seller, I was relieved to get back to the Institute a few years later. I had planned to start working on that book about religious language, but instead began a book I never intended to write, *The Cloister Walk*. I had decided that after ten years of getting to know Benedictine men and women here and in the Dakotas, I had to write about them. Just as the Dakotas are hidden in plain sight in America - few people know much about them - the Benedictines struck me as being in a similar position. I realized that I could say things about them that they couldn’t say about themselves. After that book was done I finally began work on my “language” book, looking at what I considered to be the “scary vocabulary” of the Christian faith. That eventually became *Amazing Grace*.

Throughout all of this I found discussions with other residents at the Institute to be invaluable. It was wonderful to have access to great scholars, both among the other residents and in the St. John’s community, people who knew much more about church history, monasticism, and Christian theology than I did. I shamelessly pestered Paul Philibert, and the renowned patristics scholar J. Patout Burns, as well as Columba Stewart and Dale Launderville. I recall once asking Fr Dale about the meaning of a Hebrew word in the psalms, and he said, cheerfully, “No one really knows.” In an odd way, I found that illuminating! I’m grateful that Patout was always willing to share his knowledge - and his books - with me. I think he was happy to find someone -- even a

goofy poet -- who had a thirst to know more about the early church. As my sole academic credential is a bachelor's degree from Bennington College, Patout's generosity meant a lot to me!

And that brings me to the subject of one significant way in which the Institute has evolved over the last fifty years. When I first came here in 1991, my presence and that of another resident, Irma Wyman, was somewhat controversial, as we were exceptions to the rule that residents were scholars who had Ph.Ds. Irma had a Masters in Engineering, and in the early 1950's had been a pioneer in the new field of computer science. After retiring as an executive at Honeywell she had become an Episcopal arch-deacon. Her project at the Institute, which fascinated me, was on the Rule of Benedict as management practice. She interviewed the abbot at St. John's, the prioress at St. Ben's, and people in management positions in both communities. As for me, I was - and am - what is politely referred to as an "independent scholar," or less politely, but just as accurately, "a freelance bum." I came to the Institute with my bachelor's degree, two books of published poetry, and a deep interest in monasticism that had led Fr. Terrence Kardong to appoint me to the editorial board of *The American Benedictine Review*. That's a thin resume.

My being an artist who had been living and working outside of academia wasn't so much a problem for me as it was the occasion for many lively encounters. I learned, for example, one thing that you should never say to a philosopher. Another resident was someone you suspected had begun citing Kant and Nietzsche when he was still in diapers, and while he was friendly he remained a bit suspicious of me. One day he grew exasperated with something I'd said and complained, "All you do is tell stories." Instinctively, I responded: "What else is there?" Ouch! But even so small an encounter did point to something valuable: that people's intelligence takes different forms, and while we experience the world in vastly different ways, each way has its own validity. The philosopher pulls things apart to examine them and makes us think about what each part means. The poet yanks unlikely things together and says -- here's the poem -- and whatever meaning you find in these words is the meaning. My conversation with the philosopher that day ended happily - we were able to laugh at each other, and at ourselves.

One poem I wrote at the Institute, in which I pulled together a wild variety of sources, led to a less happy experience. The process of writing it reflects the typically haphazard way in which poems come to be. One inspiration was a Pink Panther movie I'd recently seen, in which Peter Sellers takes a dramatic fall into a large fountain. After climbing out he addresses some spectators, announcing with great dignity, "I fail, where others succeed." Somehow this made me think of Christ, and how his death by crucifixion had

seemed a failure to his disciples; and continues to haunt even people of faith, because it can look so much like failure. Yet the Christian faith has succeeded; it's still here after 2,000 years. I must have been reading Luke 14 at the time, because some of the things Jesus says in that chapter struck me as being worthy of Inspector Clouseau: "sit in the lowly place," invite people you don't know to your banquets. Advice most of us would consider foolish. I made the poem a kind of commentary on Luke 14, and ended with a punning reference to Romans 13. The last lines are: "He puts us on; we put him on; another of his jokes."

When I shared this new poem with the other residents during a coffee break, one man was clearly displeased and said, "Some of us take Jesus seriously." The response didn't surprise me: it represents, in a nutshell, the conflict that often flares up between artists and Christians. If you bring Jesus together with Inspector Clouseau, you are somehow equating them, and it's offensive. This man came from a conservative Protestant denomination, and I'd say that in general Protestants have a harder time accepting what artists do than Catholics. I have some evidence of this - that poem was later published in a Catholic magazine. Now that the Institute has an artist-in-residence program I would hope that there is more fruitful dialogue concerning the arts than was sometimes possible when I was first here.

I'm extremely grateful for one exchange about poetry that came in the question and answer session after one of my public talks at the Institute. I had tried to put together an interesting program, a "themed reading" of poems by myself and other contemporary poets reflecting on Biblical stories. I also suspected that most of the poets -- Jane Flanders, Ed Field, Raphael Campo, Anne Porter, would be unfamiliar, and it would be a joy to introduce them to the audience.

One poem was by Celia Gilbert, about Lot's wife, in which she suggests that that the woman turns back because she can't bear to leave her neighbors behind and abandon them to their fate. Like many women writers today, Gilbert is focusing on the story of an unnamed woman in scripture. More astonishingly, she weaves the Biblical tale with quotes from interviews with the American pilots who dropped the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and also the doctors who treated the victims. Gilbert refuses to allow the listener to dismiss the story of Lot and his wife as an ancient myth; she makes it contemporary, and challenging.

This poem generated a sharp question from Patout Burns. Referring to Gilbert's including the World War II material, he asked, "What gave the poet the right to do this?" I responded by saying that this is a question poets seldom ask themselves, because the plain truth is that poets can do anything they want. Patout nodded, as if he had

expected as much. But, I added, with that great freedom comes responsibility, and a serious poet, like Gilbert, knows that she's writing within a tradition -- of midrash, of *lectio divina*.

While I was reluctant to speak for the poet, I said that I suspected her poem had begun as many do, with her noticing a connection that she felt compelled to explore, in this case a similarity between the Biblical story of Sodom and the descriptions of nuclear destruction in those Japanese cities. I think the poem is a legitimate act of Biblical interpretation, a kind of serious play with scripture. Of course, the patron saint of this is Emily Dickinson, who knew the Bible extremely well, and once remarked: "Consider the lilies is the only commandment I ever obeyed."

If I had to sum up in one word what the Institute has meant to me, I'd say "friendship." It's a place where friendships develop, and where you come to understand more about a variety of Christian traditions because people are willing to share their own faith journeys. The Institute reinforces what people involved in ecumenical and interfaith dialogue have long known: in being asked to talk about your own tradition, and better articulating it for another person, you come to a better understanding of what it means to you. My experience with this at the Institute was a direct inspiration for writing *Amazing Grace*. In that book I was trying to describe what I believed so that anyone - no matter what their religious tradition, or lack of it - could better understand the Christian faith.

Most residents seemed to find the Institute a safe place in which they could reveal themselves. An economist, who was a cradle Catholic, said that what he was hearing from the Biblical scholars and church historians made him realize that he'd taken too much about his church for granted, and he was grateful to be given a richer perspective. A theologian, Russ Spittler, made a deep impression on me and other residents, partly because he came from a tradition most of us knew little about, the Pentecostal denomination Assemblies of God.

Russ had grown up in that church, which he said was looked down upon as being for people on the wrong side of the tracks. A teacher at an unaccredited Bible college he attended recognized his fine intellect and encouraged him, against all odds, to apply to Harvard Divinity School. He went there, and nearly had a nervous breakdown because his Harvard professors were contradicting everything he'd ever been told about the Bible. But he stayed the course and had a distinguished career teaching at Fuller. Russ admitted that he was suspect in his own church because of that Harvard degree; and suspect in some academic circles because of his membership in the Assemblies of God. He and his wife Bobbie invited the other residents to attend a worship service at

their church, where some people spoke in tongues. I still have a list Russ gave us, a list of items you have to swear you believe in order to join the Assemblies of God. It doesn't tempt me in the least, but I'm grateful to Russ and his wife for their candor and generosity in sharing their tradition.

I have many lovely moments in my memory bank. One was of the Irish priest Thomas Carroll who was clearly moved to see my husband's dog-eared volume of Jeremy Taylor's writings that he had edited. And both my husband, who was also a writer, and I were delighted by Paul Philibert's enthusiasm for his project on Christian symbols. For a time, nearly every day, Paul would share his newest drafts with us. In a more recent residency I was glad to make the acquaintance of Michael McGregor, and hear him talk about his work, a magnificent biography of Thomas Merton's good friend -- and a great poet but under-rated poet -- Thomas Lax.

I'd like to close with a final story. For a number of residents, my interest in the daily liturgy of the hours -- especially my willingness to climb the hill to the church at 6:15 AM, no matter the weather -- was considered odd. But one day I mentioned to a young Biblical scholar, a Baptist, that the community would soon be hearing First Corinthians at morning prayer, and "her passage" was coming up.

She was at the Institute turning her thesis from Yale Divinity into a book. It concerned the text about God's foolishness and human wisdom, and the definition of Christ as "the power of God and the wisdom of God." Her public talk at the Institute had been about how radical it was to juxtapose "wisdom" and "power," as it broke with the ancient tradition of opposing "wisdom" to "foolishness." In the typical, long-term labor of a Ph.D candidate doing intense textual analysis, she had devoted some ten years of her life to looking at that passage from every possible angle.

She did attend morning prayer on the day this passage was read. Afterwards I noticed her sitting slumped in her seat. I approached and asked if she was feeling okay. With a stunned look on her face, she said, "When he read that passage I heard something in it I had never noticed before." I think I was as surprised as she was. All I could say was, "I guess that's the power of liturgy."

There is much power here: in the liturgy, in the monasteries of Benedictine men and women, in the Institute. Having the Institute residents establish a kind of community, with shared worship at the center, informal coffee hours, and some meals together, is a powerful and essential reminder that the Christian religion is communal. But it's not a gathering of the like-minded. Our little groups, like a monastery, or a church congregation, for that matter, consisted of such an unlikely and motley crew that you

suspected that only God could have brought us together, hoping for the best. (It's so crazy, it might be seen as one of God's Inspector Clouseau moves!)

But at a time when difference is being used cynically by so many to generate fear and distrust, it's more important than ever to have a place where diverse people of good will can come together, peaceably, reflect on their faith and their scholarship, and listen to each other, and learn. So here's to another fifty years. And as we say in Hawaii, IMUA -- onward!