

Rev. Joseph J. Driscoll

And Late the Sweet Birds Sang

Regularly driving the 70-mile stretch of interstate between Milwaukee and Madison, I have come to know well the loping of the fields, and the rising of the ridges, that break up an otherwise flat expanse of farmlands dominating the horizon to my right and to my left. The colors of the seasons change with the light of shortened or lengthened days.

Late autumn has mowed down the golden fields left over from the harvest, and I notice for the first time on this drive the rolls of death-black mud in the turned over soil. The fields are lying fallow, as they say.

I am smiling because I like the word “fallow.” I am not sure why. It may be that I associate the turned over fallow earth – nature in her bed sleeping – with my own turning over in my night’s sleep. I love turning over in the night and early morning, especially when I don’t have to get up at a certain time the next morning! I love the feeling of stretching muscles, and then relaxing them, with each turn my body lying fallow after the harvest of the day, or the week.

Gazing to my right on this solitary drive, my eye catches the bright yellow of clinging leaves on the branches of trees far in the distance; the lavish bright light contrasts starkly with the pitch black of the wet earth in the foreground. Arising in my mind are the lines of a Shakespearean sonnet (73) assigned to my memory by a college English professor:

*That time of year thou mayest in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
Bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang.*

The quiet now “where late the sweet birds sang” heightens the loss of this changing season out my window – and in my heart. I am pensive on this drive for I am struggling with the loping and the rising of emotions in me, at once bright and yellow, and at once deathly and black.

I am coming to the end of this stretch in my 11-year ministry as your executive leader in the National Association of Catholic Chaplains. It is time.

It is time to rest and lie fallow for a season, and patiently await a new spring from a God ever seeding, planting, growing and nurturing new life. It is time for retreat, rest, and some writing between the seasons.

I wrestled with this issue of time. The timing is not good, I thought. Look at all the exciting things that are happening.

But you and I know that is a myth. The time is never good. Unless of course we watch the hands turn on God’s own movements through our hearts and our histories. Within this conception of time, the biblical writers make the distinction between “chronos” and “crisis,” ticking time or turning time, time on the march or time in the round. In that frame, the time is good.

For weeks now I have asked God for an image to hold my inadequate words together for you in this last *Vision* article. I feel a

sad smile of gratitude come between God and myself at this moment as I turn my head back from the window on this late afternoon drive. It is a very intimate moment between us. “Ask and it shall be given to you.”

And my God you give me an image in nature’s leave-taking in holy autumn: the fields, rolled over soil, yellows and blacks “where late the sweet birds sang.” All on this last drive.

With all the normal grieving of any major life change, somehow the master of the English language crafts hope so well for me in this image from the 73rd sonnet. These past 11 years have indeed been sweet.

With energy, excitement, and eagerness (and hair and youth and no glasses!) I hit the ground running in the holy autumn of 1992. Or should I say I dashed to the airport flying? I was still supervising students in a CPE unit in Philadelphia when I was already on planes to represent us at cognate group meetings, the bishops’ meeting, the COMISS Network.

By the way, as I write this I am going to my last bishops’ meeting where I think I am the “senior observer” in the reserved bleachers in the back of the hotel ballroom. You know you have been there a long time when a few years ago a USCCB staff person came chasing me at the break waving a phone message on a piece of paper calling out, “Bishop Driscoll, Bishop Driscoll” (in your dreams!) Bishop Michael Driscoll of Fargo eventually got his message!

The bishops have been wonderful in their support of our mission, which is of course, the Church’s mission for which they are the responsible. I had a first-time privilege to address the Administrative Board of the USCCB (47 bishops!) in Washington, D.C., last September. Struggling with some continuing challenges regarding the canonical understanding of our professional title “chaplain,” I need to tell you that to a person, these bishops were with us. And will continue to be with us.

Bishop Melczek has been an extraordinary collaborator and a true liaison between our organization and the U.S. Church, and in fact, the universal Church (in two visits to Rome he spoke with such an impassioned voice for our chaplains). I remember on both occasions – where the initial conversation needed to be bishop-to-bishop – looking over and smiling as he rattled off statistics and arguments in explaining the NACC, our mission, our gifts to the Church, and the challenges facing us. He didn’t need his coach (yours truly), I could have swooped up the folds of my black cassock (ugh, first time ever – I think I left that out of my report to you until this confession) and left to wait outside sipping a glass of vino while he conducted our “business.”

Archbishop Kelly, my star collaborator for six years before, kept telling me as he put forth his successor’s name, “You will love Dale Melczek, everybody does.” I do, and everybody I know does. Archbishop Kelly, and Bishop Matthieson before, and all the many Episcopal advisors from around the country, and the more

than 50 other bishops who I visited in their home dioceses, have been enormously helpful in carrying forth our mission. They really appreciate our ministry.

Truth be known, working with the bishops has been sweet. And that was a primary goal that I articulated to the National Leadership Council in my interview process in Pittsburgh on Labor Day weekend 11 years ago.

Closer collaboration with the other professional cognate groups in pastoral care, counseling, and education was a second goal of mine 11 years ago. You have heard my words of excitement about Toronto 2003 echo like a mountain yodel through the pages of *Vision* and across the gatherings where I have presented since that historic meeting.

We can do it. We can be one voice. We can give up this, to gain this. We can offer this, to enrich this. We can stop being six and really look at being one. We can be firmly rooted in all that is truly our own precious identity, and we can join others in growing a new and equally precious common identity.

Diversity is all about God, or God is all about diversity, or both. How much we can learn from the person or organization that is different! Toronto (2003), Charlotte, (2000) St. Louis (1995), Milwaukee (1994), Minneapolis (1988) were conferences where we came together, pooled resources, gave up some “traditions,” shared in some “new traditions,” sat next to unknowns like pastoral counselors, stretched in our ability through prayer to find a common voice to a common God.

We cried (many of us), 1,500 diverse attendees, as Henri Nouwen, in accepting the COMISS Award in 1994, spontaneously shared reflections about changing and dying; about the call to be “fruitful,” not “successful”; about the circus and the role of the “catcher,” and how the trapeze artist cannot grab the hands of the catcher, but must stretch his or hers out in complete trust; about his own vulnerability, eerily less than two years before his sudden and seemingly untimely death.

Isn't that what true collaboration is about? Changing, dying, being fruitful in our common venture rather than “successful” in our own ways of doing things. Isn't it about stretching those hands out and resisting the temptation to grab (control)? Isn't it about vulnerability, even death, for something greater?

One of the many delightful partners and collaborators I worked with in the pastoral care, counseling and education movement was Julian Bryd. Like Dale Melczek, everybody loves Julian Byrd – primarily because he belongs to everybody! Julian was a member of most of the cognate groups. I had worked closely with Julian on the executive committee at COMISS for many years.

One of my fondest memories of Julian was the time I went to the microphone at an ACPE business meeting in which I think the assembly was honoring him as he was leaving office.

I said, “Julian, would you consider coming into full communion in the Catholic Church this coming Easter Vigil? (Long pause with strange looks). The way I figure it, you have been president of ACPE, president of the College of Chaplains, president of COMISS – if you become a Catholic then we can elect you president of NACC!”

Those were the nascent days of NAJC, so if he hadn't retired and he were around today, we would have had to attend his bar mitzvah!

Collaboration is about relationships, relationships, relationships.

And in the building of relationships, we work together on clarifying HIPAA regulations, saving the Medicare pass-through from budget cuts, not allowing health care systems to discriminate against chaplains by singling them out for sex abuse disclosure forms, and yes, writing a set of universal standards for chaplaincy, supervised pastoral education, and a common code of ethics.

Truth be known, in the midst of challenges, disagreements, even raised voices, collaborating with our colleagues from the different cognate groups has been sweet.

But nothing has been sweeter than the relationships over these years with so many of you. You have been kind, generous and affirming through so many letters, so many phone calls, so many e-mails, so many conversations.

You have challenged me, too. Most recently, I received several letters from our emeritus members asking why their new membership pins did not stipulate their status as “certified emeritus members.” They argued how much their certification meant, and continues to mean to them, even in retirement. We had thought this through in our planning, but in the end didn't appreciate the importance of this recognition of professional achievement.

So we created new pins, and in the accompanying letter I told the certified emeritus members “we heard them, and this is your organization.”

That vignette captures for me the most important resources I had in leading this organization during these years – each of you. One voice, one insight, one idea in conversation, and I would often take it back and bring it to the “table” where things get done.

I remember a phone call from a woman in the Northwest who suggested that utilizing a term like “the dying” does not show respect to persons. Instead the term makes people an object. I never thought of that. And now I have never forgotten that. And that's why we titled the 2002 symposium, “Comprehensive Spiritual Care for Our Sick and Dying: A National Pastoral Plan.”

We have had great conversations. We have laughed, we have prayed, we have written standards, planned conferences, and created new structures. We have been on river boats, harbor cruises, even an alligator swamp ride. We have broken the bread of life, shared a glass of wine, anointed our sick, honored our NACC grandparents, opened up God's word in theological reflection.

And it has been sweet.

Eleven years ago last Labor Day weekend, then President Richard Augustyn introduced me for the first time to the membership at the Eucharistic Liturgy at the annual conference in Pittsburgh. I have never forgotten the words he chose: “We entrust Joe Driscoll with the leadership of our organization.” People applauded warmly and generously, but the word “trust” echoed through the years thereafter in my memory. It has been a sacred trust. And I hope I have been worthy of that trust.

I have come full circle. As I said when this trust was first given to me, I say again with all my heart: I thank you, all of you, and each of you.

And my God, I thank you during this leave-taking in holy autumn: the fields, rolled over soil, yellows and blacks “where late the sweet birds sang.” All on this last drive. ▼