

Application for accelerated clergy program

2024-07-14

Account of my life

I have recently completed a hundred or so page autobiography, a memoir, intended to share with my siblings and children. That document is available if anyone feels inclined to read it.

I am now 73 years old. A summary of my life would be rather more like a baobab tree than a Christmas tree. It has occurred to me that one possible way to survey my life would be to identify the people who were heroes at various times throughout my seven plus decades.

Heroes

I have two early heroes from about the same time in my life. Several of my children referred to this part of their lives as the “single digits.” At a summer Bible camp session when I was still quite young, the memoir of Dale Evans was read to us. In it she recounted her experience of having a child with Down’s syndrome who died at a tender age. *Angel Unaware*. Dale Evans ultimately experienced the all-too-short life of Robin as a profound gift from God.

At about the same time my parents took us to the church grange building to watch a movie about the recent Nobel prize winner Albert Schweitzer. I thought at the time that this man must be a saint as well as a genius. I would learn more about him through my 20s and 30s in graduate school in theology and in my efforts to be an instrument maker. I was interested in ancient musical instruments and Schweitzer, among all the other things he was, a world renowned organ scholar and player.

Along with the more mundane heroes of my adolescence, baseball players especially, there were several scientists that captivated my imagination. Joseph Lister the physician. Nicola Tesla the genius electric theorist. Robert Oppenheimer the brilliant head of the Manhattan Project who was also a practitioner of Asian Religions. In my final year of High School I encountered T.S. Eliot. I have been unable to shake down to the present day.

The most passionate “hero” of my 20s was a contemporary of Eliot. Ezra Pound. It was he more than anyone who taught me the power and luminescence of language. He was alienating, seemingly a genius, got many things wrong, but – I would wager – found himself ushered into the great Elysium.

Beginning in my 20s and then for many years after, religious figures dominated my “heroes”.

- Nicholas Ferrar
- Mother Teresa (and the author who introduced her to the world; Malcolm Muggeridge)
- Charles de Foucauld
- Carlo Carretto

Probably dozens more could be added to represent my active years in ministry, 1983-2012.

I ask myself, “Who are the heroes of my twilight years? Harry Chapin comes to mind, the singer-songwriter who, like Jesus died all too young. Pete Seeger, a friend of Chapin’s, reflects for me something of what I admire about growing old. For a short period of time in my younger days, Zorba the Greek was a fictional hero after whom I wanted to model my life. It was a spiritual director who showed me that I was far more like the narrator in that novel than the main character. True heroes for me are all those who have been occasion for those kinds of insights in my own life.

I am committed to life-long learning. I'm not where I want to be in the fashioning of a life, though I've come a long way. But, at least in some ways, I can see that I've reflected, however crudely, the image of a life-long hero: Jesus of Nazareth.

Family

I was born into a medical family. My father was a physician and my mother was a nurse. I was born in the mountains of Arizona, because my father was the doctor for a copper mining company. While still young my father moved us to the Denver area where I grew up and went to school. I had two brothers and one sister, of whom I was the oldest. One of the things I learned through decades of pastoral ministry is that everyone's family is remarkable, noted for dysfunction as well as health, worthy of a great novel and ordinary – like everybody else. Not until I was nearly 70 did I learn that I had an older sister. I've corresponded with her but never met her. Obviously there are stories there to be told.

My parents were divorced in my early adolescence. I know that in both straightforward ways and mystically twisted ways that divorce had a profound impact on my own life. I have been divorced twice and married three times. My current wife and I have been married since 2012. I have 5 children that I have fathered in 2 of the marriages. Interestingly, my best relationships are with the 2 children of my current wife. They feel like my children.

I experienced my divorces as a kind of death, and from them I experienced a wide range of grieving responses. The alienations engendered in all of that have led to one difficult relationship with a daughter and one broken relationship with a daughter, both of them with my 2nd wife. I have experienced that as a death of sorts, and my reactions and responses continue, even though in many ways I have found ways to go on with my life.

Development of my religious life

I have already given some indications about how one might begin to understand the development of my religious life. From a young age I have felt a kinship with Jesus and God and all that might go hand-in-hand with that. In some ways a trace that back to the lap of my grandmother who was devoted to her Methodist church and happily shared stories and prayers with us. Around the time of my parents divorce I had a keen sense that those stories, and the ways that had been taught me in the church of my youth, were not sufficient to sustain me. My mother was looking for a church that could support her during the time of separation and divorce from my father. She found her way to the episcopal church. I remember to this day what I felt as I was introduced to a more sacramentally oriented church than I had known. The words that I used to describe my experience had to do with a shared common cup and the candles that were lit with actual flames. I said that it felt like "real church". I rather think that I've been looking for the real church ever since.

Like countless others, my 20s were spent searching for who I was and what I was sent for, how to make a living, and how to find some satisfaction in the life I was seeking. I found my way back to the church through the friendship of a retired priest who is doing research at the library I worked out. Over many hours and days and lunches we became friends. He was comfortable with all my talk about God and prayer and how it all fit together. It felt safe to go where he had gone before.

During this time I crave a community like I had read had developed around Little Gidding through the guidance of Nicholas Ferrar. I learned about communities of different kinds being developed by people of faith: Sojourners in Washington D.C., Catholic Worker houses, charismatic retreat centers. One thing and another and I found myself in seminary, preparing for parish ministry. Looking back, I didn't have a clue what I was doing.

I told my (Bishop) that I had a vision of doing ministry where nobody else wanted to go. Hospice chaplaincy perhaps? Small church ministry based on the working priest model? Mixing teaching and pastoral care? Ultimately my ministry has combined elements of all these things. I graduated cum laude from seminary, but halted for the time being the ordination to ministry in order to attend graduate school at Notre Dame. I felt called to both, and I have found creative ways through the decades to do both. I was ordained in 1982. I stopped my PhD program and settled on an MA in theology. In 1989 I had my first “cure” at the smallest church in the diocese, and I joined the faculty of St. Joseph’s College as an assistant professor of theology.

Finally I retired from my career as a parish priest in 2012 and had a short career as an adjunct professor at several universities. Now, I am retired from all of it, ie. I’m not being paid to do it, but I still preach and celebrate, and I recognize that in many ways I’m a teacher at heart.

A time when I accompanied someone on their faith journey

There are so many stories I could tell in response to this prompt. In many ways “accompanying people on their faith journey” is what I have lived for these past 40+ years. One, perhaps stands out as particularly gentle and sustained.

The church I served was located on the shore of Lake Michigan. I met early on a couple from Memphis. He was a church organist and a professor in the music department of Memphis University. She was a faithful and active Episcopalian. They owned a cottage beside the lake and would spend summers there. In time I hired a music minister at the church, but one of his requirements was that he would have the summers off. My friend, I’ll call him Warren, was glad to be a regular replacement on the organ.

We talked frequently. At first mostly about church music, but along the way about our lives. We became friends. Eventually I asked him to be a godparent for my youngest daughter when she was baptized. As we talked, he trusted me more and more because he knew that I accepted him, that I loved him, without conditions. He shared more about the deep sadness that was injected into his life when his beloved youngest daughter had died in a climbing accident while traveling in Europe. This had happened some 25 years earlier. He had never really believed in God ever since.

Still, I accepted him, and since I represented that God he didn’t trust, he was surprised that I still accepted him. 100% accepted him. And so it was until one summer when he was on a tour of 16th c. Mexican organs. He fell gravely ill and was hospitalized for many weeks in Mexico. He seemed to be near death several times.

When he returned to Michigan City he was a changed person. He couldn’t wait to tell me his story. Sitting there, on the organ bench, he told me of how he now believed. He described the passion with which he had argued with God over many years, and of how he had found many and sophisticated reasons to disbelieve. But then, as if in a sudden burst of light, lying in a foreign hospital bed, he found that there was one thing in the world that he could not argue with. He had experienced one thing that seemed to make the whole universe real for him in a new way. He said, “I cannot deny love.”

I know that it was this newfound trust in a loving God that supported him through his remaining 10 years or so of struggle with multiple myeloma. Journeying with him, as a loving friend, is one of the great privileges of my life. I am deeply grateful.

My impression of Spiritual Direction

I first became aware of what I regard as spiritual direction during my seminary years. Our seminary had the good fortune to host Kenneth Leech for several months on 2 successive years. He, of course, was the author of *Soul Friend; spiritual direction in the modern world*. He

spiritedly merged a passionate longing for social justice, a background in Anglo-Catholic spirituality, and an awareness of the Celtic tradition that others like John O'Donohue have written about in the years since. I learned much from him.

I understand spiritual direction to be a journey that two people agree to take, a kind of pilgrimage. It may be shorter or longer, but it is a journey not a weekend getaway. Chief among the requirements I understand to be:

love and acceptance

listening with care and attention

questioning with a concern for the other person's life trajectory

I accepted for myself long ago that I needed a spiritual director in order to find my own way in the mysteries that sang to me:

Why am here?

Where am I going?

How do I respond to the unfathomable richness of the creation that surrounds me?

Something like that is my impression of Spiritual Direction.

-- Dale C. Hathaway

July 15, 2024