



### About the Author

The Reverend Robert Walcott was raised in Wooster, Ohio. He attended the College of Wooster and then Church Divinity School of the Pacific, where he experienced first-hand the Berkeley scene of the 1960s. After two years as a curate, he entered Ohio State University and earned an MBA in healthcare administration. He spent most of his career in hospital and long-term care administration, and retired in 2004. Father Walcott lives near downtown Cleveland with his wife, Diane. In addition to his priestly duties, he travels extensively with Diane, enjoys spending time with his two teenage grandchildren, gives tours at the Cleveland Museum of Art, and is on the board of Apollo's Fire, Cleveland's Grammy-winning Baroque orchestra. Readers may contact Father Walcott at [bobwal31@aol.com](mailto:bobwal31@aol.com).

### About *Vintage Voice*

*Vintage Voice* is a monthly publication for retirees of the Episcopal Church who, in sharing their stories, help deepen the sense of community. We hope you enjoy these articles and find them helpful. Stories are published with the authors' permission. If you have a reflection about your life in retirement, consider writing for the *Vintage Voice*! Send your submissions to [vintagevoice@cpg.org](mailto:vintagevoice@cpg.org).

# VINTAGE VOICE



## After 50 Years, a Second Chance

by the Reverend Robert Walcott

Four years ago, I called diocesan headquarters to inquire about an opening for priest-in-charge at St. Mark's Episcopal Church, a small parish in Wadsworth, Ohio. I had been retired from full-time work in hospital administration for over 11 years. It had been more than 50 years since I had taken on the first of several unsuccessful clerical assignments. I was 73 years old. So, why would I want to commute almost an hour-and-a-half each week to minister to a small, aging congregation? I knew only that I had been called by God, and I felt compelled to answer.

### Running for Cover

From the beginning of my church career more than a half-century before, something had always been in my way, preventing me from successfully ministering as a parish priest. It had all started in my early youth. How does a child deal with a mother who is emotionally abusive? How could he cope with a passive father who did nothing to stop the abuse to both that child and his sister? I reacted by completely shutting down emotionally. Decades of reflection and therapy have led me to the understanding that blocking out the pain enabled me to function as a child, and later as an adult—but that this took a major toll on my life.

The defense mechanism worked well for me, at least for a while. Although I felt lonely at times, especially as a teenager, I was able to go about my life without serious problems, until I reached my 40s. That's when my stone-cold personality started to create difficulties I couldn't ignore.

The jobs I held in ministry and in full-time work didn't require me to relate to people in a close, emotional way. At my first position as an assistant priest in a large, conservative parish, my opposition to the Vietnam War and my liberal social positions kept others at a distance. But an ulcer told me that I needed to move in a career direction where my views were less likely to be so different from those of the people who could get me fired.

### An Emotional Abyss

I attended business school and, armed with an MBA, moved into hospital administration. It seemed to be a perfect fit. Business was

business, and to my way of thinking, no emotional contact with others was needed—just cold and efficient decision-making. So my boss used me as a hatchet man.

A maintenance director under my supervision had risen to the top in his department over a career of more than 40 years with only a high school education. His background was not enough to maintain a highly complex hospital with many complicated systems—a different workplace from when he first joined the hospital. He was well over his head, and mistakes were happening. For me it was clear he had to go.

My boss agreed, but he could not bear to fire the employee after so many years of faithful service and so near his retirement age. Instead, he had me fire him. Even though his family could ill-afford the loss of income, unlike my boss I had no heart to empathize. I felt nothing except justified in letting the man go.

My next job as chief executive officer of a suburban hospital did not start or end well. My new boss was the chair of the board of trustees, and his emotional intelligence was no higher than mine. In my first days on the job, he told me to visit the director of purchasing at his home, where he was recuperating from major surgery. As I told the invalid in his pajamas and bathrobe that he was not to return to work, he looked at me incredulously. I could offer no specific explanation, just that he was being terminated for incompetence.

This did not endear me to my other employees or to the many friends the director of purchasing had in the local community. To top it all off, my boss soon left town for a new position! Less than a year later, the new board president engineered my own departure. “You did everything you were asked to do,” he told me, “but now it’s time to move in a new direction.”

## **The Second Chance**

I was in my 50s and in therapy when my eyes were opened and I learned that I was emotionally inert. With a lot of time and counseling—and God’s help—I was healed. I became aware of the pain of others and, yes, their joy. I could finally express concern, and people knew I really meant it. I deepened my spirituality and was able to share it. I could tell those who suffered that God loved them, and they believed me.

I could become the pastor I couldn’t be earlier in life. But I couldn’t practice these new gifts God had given me because I wasn’t in a church setting. I was old and I was retired.

And then I made that phone call to the diocese.

I couldn’t refuse God’s new call to me. And I couldn’t just stay at my parish for a little while. I needed time to exercise my ministry. So I have committed to be their priest, God willing, until I turn 80 in 2022. After 50 years, I have come full circle.



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