

# The Vintage Voice

Serving The Church Pension Fund's Family of Beneficiaries

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## The Darker Side (A Work in Progress)

*The Rev. Frank Carson Knebel*

Editor's note: This month's *Vintage Voice* is being published posthumously. The author died while the manuscript was undergoing final editorial review.

Clergy-written pieces, including those that appear in popular print, are supposed to chronicle a triumphal spiritual journey. Two lay-written books I have recently reread — C. S. Lewis's classic *Surprised by Joy*, and the outstanding *The Language of God*, by the eminent scientist Francis S. Collins, director of the recently completed Human Genome Project — tell similar stories, each starting with agnosticism and ending in belief.

Regrettably, my own odyssey, emotionally and intellectually, has been in the opposite direction. One of my three previous articles for *The Vintage Voice* touched lightly on this, and to judge from the responses I received, I am not alone in my experience.

Fresh from college, dispensed from military service, I entered Church Divinity School of the Pacific with an inherited and unquestioned faith, full of myself as an exemplary Episcopal youth. Disturbed by what I felt was the undisciplined atmosphere of the place, I looked forward to my first preaching class, a suitable pulpit from which I could shame my fellow students into canonical conformity. Unwisely, I chose to offer a ten-minute exposition on the Holy Trinity. The fact that the Church's finest minds have failed to make sense of this doctrine for two-thousand years did not deter me in the least, and I had barely covered the first person of the Trinity when Dr. Rodenmayer rose to his feet and crossed the hall to a door clearly marked "MEN," remarking over his shoulder, "Go ahead, I can still hear you."

I found this devastating and took to avoiding all student contact save for meals and required classes, arriving ostentatiously early for chapel where I knelt on the cold tile floor and leafed through my breviary (Job scraping himself with potsherds).

But the Redemptive Community would not allow this. After several days, one of the seniors, about six years older than I, knelt down next to me. With a look of great caring he handed me a garish sympathy card, awash in shamrocks and gold leaf and bearing the likeness of St. Dymphna, a personage popular in Ireland as the patron of the mentally and emotionally ill. Inside was an irreverently funny message that my editors won't let me print. Somehow the dark humor, which proved to be a hallmark of my entire seminary experience, got through to me, and when the same senior paused by my door later that evening, I gestured him in.

He offered me a cup of drugstore coffee. "Understand you went down the tubes in Homiletics a few days ago. Don't worry about it. Old Rodenmayer sometimes crosses the line between constructive commentary and bloodletting."

Highly condensed, his pastoral observations were as follows: “For what it’s worth, I came here thinking I knew a lot about God. Kept to myself, avoided the horseplay, hit the books four or five hours a night. But then I came to realize that seminary is less an academic experience than a refining, a redemption that occurs in unlikely ways. Mostly those doing the redeeming simply force us to accept ourselves as we really are. Come down to La Valle’s for a beer some evening and find out. You may learn something about yourself, and even about God.”

This turned out to be the case, but, following ordination, my first day as a curate also proved prophetic. Assigned by my rector to canvass a highly “transient” area of the parish, I had barely stepped out of my car at the first address when I was greeted with a rude gesture by a passing wino. Inside, I had beer spilled on my new black suit by a nervous gaggle of military housewives. At another address, a blue-haired, English-sounding lady informed me that all the Episcopalians in the house were at Disneyland and then, using a colorful English expression, gave me my send-off. Later, a sunbathing young woman gave me an even more explicit send-off.

The self-deprecating sense of humor I carried with me from seminary proved helpful, but then things began to go seriously downhill, and my faith in the Church had begun to fade, eroded by the slings and arrows of parish ministry and by disillusionment with some of those to whom the Church said I was to look for godly counsel and advice. Ultimately, I left a full-time pulpit for a college lectern.

Certainly over the years I have had spiritual moments, especially that Christmas Eve in 1968, driving through the rice fields of Northern California to celebrate a midnight service, and hearing the voices of men looking *down* from the bright side of the moon and proclaiming the ancient Genesis myth out into the vastness of space. (His own spiritual response to the same event was cited by the aforementioned geneticist, Francis S. Collins.) As a supply priest I have been privileged to preside or eulogize at standing-room-only requiems for two of the most whole and joyful people I have ever known. I remember kneeling in the uncertain glow of an antique hurricane lamp, keeping watch with a total stranger and her aged mother, who was dying in an isolated mountain cabin in the midst of the worst storm in forty years. I have had the moving experience of being invited to celebrate an *ex tempore* Eucharist for four people in a tiny chapel built of stone more than two hundred years earlier by George Augustus Selwyn, the first Anglican Bishop of New Zealand.

Such things stick with you, and the sacerdotal and pastoral aspects of a parish cure I miss.

But while this accounting is written from the relative safety of retirement, my journey into the darker side began long before, with issues never addressed in seminary: a sense of estrangement between creed and empiricism; a great gulf between Christian assertions of an interactive loving God and the state of the world and indeed the Church.

I find it increasingly difficult to reconcile this disparity, yet find myself oddly comforted by the Gospel affirmation that, at the Last Supper, the invited guests included both the disillusioned Judas and doubting Thomas. And, against all reason and experience, I too continue to seek out Bread and Wine.



*At his death in July of 2012, the Rev. Frank Carson Knebel lived in Arizona near his two sons. His eldest son is founder and CEO of a large entertainment organization. The younger holds a PhD in Aquatic Biology and teaches at a local college.*