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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@cpf.org.

VINTAGE VOICE



Searching for YES

by the Rev. Lyn Gillespie Brakeman

“NO!” I say out loud.

NO to retirement! even though I've been officially retired for 10 years. Other retired clergy are happy not to attend meetings about dilemmas facing the Church, delighted with travel possibilities, gleeful at the prospect of doing whatever they want and when they want. Not I. Retirement carries gloomy associations. Benched. Isolated.

NO to old age! even though I'm elderly. I know I will die like everyone else. But all I can think of are the constraints that aging brings. Instead of talking about the resurrection, like any good Christian (especially one who is ordained), I dwell on Jesus' words to Peter in John 21: “When you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.”

I've seen such constraints on wheelchairs and beds. I've seen old people bound. I saw my mother, bent with osteoporosis, strapped into a chair. For her safety, they said. Everything in my soul shouted NO!

None of my clever Scriptural interpretations or professional credentials cuts into the force of my NO. As a trained professional bereavement counselor, I know I'm in grief about my bygone youth, and my anger is resistance. Am I saying NO to God, too?

Oh, God, I just want to proclaim “YES!” for once. To find my inner YES, though, I must retell a story that took place nearly 80 years ago. It has not lost its capacity to enliven me even at this stage of my life. This is the story of my beginning, of my YES.

Worlds of Wonder

I am three years old. I'm sitting cross-legged on a worn maroon rug under our large dining room table with cross beams between its legs and a tablecloth that hangs to the floor. I'm chattering to someone—yet, no one is there. I have placed five Ritz Crackers on a cross beam. One is for me, three for imaginary friends, and one for a friend I call God.

I am meeting God for the very first time, not in a book or because of my mother's telling me I am a gift from God. I am seeking refuge from my parents' cocktail hour and its martinis, the rival I hate. I am meeting God

on my own. God listens to me completely, silently, and without criticism or condemnation. Just listening. This God lets me know I matter, no matter what. This God steals my soul forever and ever. This is my God. This God lets me be.

My younger sister told me years later that she remembered my going under the table, and my strict rule that no one was allowed under there with me. Under that table, three worlds of wonder opened up to me—the wonder of words, of being a girl, of being with God. I never questioned the veracity of God's true presence with me. My memory has no accompanying visual image, but just the experience of total immersion in Being itself—my words, my small voice, my ideas.

I'm not sentimental about my spiritual experience. God didn't change things outside me, but God listened to me and changed things inside me.

I continued my under-the-table Ritz Cracker ritual for years. The ritual may have birthed a vocational call to priesthood. It certainly kept me going through life's "deaths"—sin, neglect, abuse, forgetting, and NO. Just as Jews tell the Exodus story, Muslims recount the Mohammed story, and Christians proclaim the Jesus story over and over again, so I repeat my small story.

Even as I rebel against retirement and age, I know that my NO is not the final word. This is the tale of wonder that has been with me since the beginning. It sparked my soul as a child, and it will be on my lips until the day I die. This is the story of my YES.



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