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A Time to Gather Stones Together

The Rev. Frank C. Knebel

In the brilliant screen play by Robert Bolt, *A Man For All Seasons*, Sir Thomas More refuses to endorse the proclamations of Henry VIII regarding the secular authority of the Pope. Standing in opposition to the King and the entire Parliament, More, the second most powerful man in England, cannot bring himself to deny principles of civil and ecclesiastical law which for him are clearly stated in both the Magna Carta and the King's own coronation oath. At one point, More explains his position to a friend by saying, "What finally matters is that I believe it." Then, after a moment's reflection, he adds, "No, not that I *believe* it, but that *I* believe it."

More's faith, integrity, and intellect demand that he define himself by *who* he is, rather than *what* he is. And when Henry removes him from his office as chancellor, More allows himself a bemused, self-deprecating comment: "It seems I am no longer a great man."

When we are, in effect, "removed from office," whether by actual retirement, assuming a non-parochial position, or leaving the active ministry for other fields, there is a voice within us that subtly tries to convince us of the same thing, that we are no longer "great men." It is as if, when we shed our titles and emblems of state — the parochial trappings, our name under the word "Rector" on the church billboards — we become not only less of a priest but less of a person. For some, certainly, there may remain opportunity, as Sunday supply, to still function as priests-for-a-day; "what we are" temporarily reaffirmed amid the elegant folds of the chasuble, the enunciation of the rich liturgical phrases, the deference of the congregation to the office that we, worthy or not, represent. For others, for whatever reason, this proves not to be the case and can be a source of considerable depression.

In my case, this sense of the loss of "what I am" in official retirement was nothing new, since for years my vantage point has been as much outside the Church as in. I have been ordained for over four decades, yet only twelve or so of those years, in toto, have been full-time. Those periods, and the occasional supply work that followed, served mainly to confirm that, trained as a priest, preacher, and pastor, I was cut out for neither the organizational requirements of a parish, nor for survival amid the intrigues of diocesan and parochial power.

My non-parochial years, spent chiefly as a college instructor in the Humanities, meant in effect accepting a new identity, and thus a new sense of both what and who I am; serving a different function, answering to a different form of address. In my college work, none of my students know I am a priest, and thus my worth in their eyes depends, in part, certainly, because of my office as a professor, but also on *me*, my perceived interest in them and my passion for what I am doing.

Just as when opportunities to exercise the offices of the priesthood are not forthcoming, when my assigned classes do not "make," I miss the feeling of wholeness and purpose that goes with

them. For me, these “down times,” both sacred and secular, are often what Winston Churchill was wont to refer to as “the Void,” the in-between times; no specific goals to meet, no thoughts to organize for public consumption, no expectations to fulfill. Undeniably there is discouragement. Yet, at such times, when I can discipline myself to use that “down time” productively, it can be a period of immense personal growth.

For each of us, this imposed absence of specific responsibility will of necessity mean something different. For many, subject to health and finances, there is the “traditional” retirement agenda — travel, exploring new interests, finding other avenues of “service” and ministry. For all, there is time to take stock.

At the risk of some presumption, I doubt that there is a priest of the Church who, if they are truly honest with themselves, will not admit to at least some erosion of faith. The slings and arrows of both world and Church, the failings of the Redemptive Community, and intellectual doubt, all take their toll. Yet in retirement there is the gift of being able to step aside, free from the pressure of trying to “have it all together” in a (hopefully) meaningful sermon each and every Sunday. We are allowed not to have all the answers.

Here is opportunity for reflection, to wrestle privately with the ever-widening gulf between what we profess in ancient creedal statement and what our minds and experiences tell us are empirical facts. We are permitted to admit the dichotomy between the affirmation of God’s omniscience and love proclaimed in Scripture and the terrible realities of our time and the vexatious issues of sexuality, abortion, and the medical and moral dilemmas posed by advances in science.

On this plane, there is also the opportunity, indeed the necessity, to broaden our intellectual horizons, to open ourselves to the world outside the Scriptures and the approved theological tomes of the Church, and turn to other sources; to see the universal search for “The Other” from new perspectives; to find comfort and inspiration in the shared humanity of great writers; to find amusement and take delight in the foibles of the human condition; to wonder at the beauties and marvels of the natural world and the awesome vastness and incredible complexity of the cosmos which unfold on the Nature Channel; to marvel at the mechanisms of evolution and the incredible antiquity of humankind chronicled in the pages of *Discovery*, *National Geographic*, and *Time*; to pursue the wholeness of mind and spirit that we as Anglicans assert that God intends.

To quote St. Paul, I speak as a fool in this, and often, “those things which I would do, I do not.” But I *am* convinced that retirement need not be a void nor a lessening of ourselves. Rather it is a season to rediscover and redefine not *what* we are but *who* we are, of which our priesthood, though integral, is but a part.



Frank Carson Knebel lives in San Diego and teaches part-time for Southwestern College. His articles have been published in *Lefthander* and other national magazines. Current projects include a history of New Zealand and rewriting in book form an earlier series of children’s stories for *Jack and Jill* and *Child Life*. He has two grown sons, one of whom is founder and CEO of a successful record company, and the other a doctoral candidate in aquatic biology.