

# The Vintage Voice

Serving The Church Pension Fund's Family of Beneficiaries

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## Two Worlds

*The Rev. Jim Gill*

As I reflect back over fifty-eight years since my ordination, two experiences beyond the borders of my usual life stand out as transformational. The first border crossing occurred early in my ministry, the second in recent retirement. The first took me to a different culture, the second to a different religion.

In 1960, my wife, Kay, and our eighteen-month-old, Laura, boarded a P&O Liner in Los Angeles to cross the Pacific and begin eight years as missionaries in the Philippines. Surface — rather than air — travel met with the wishes of both Kay (who had experienced a recent near-accident in a plane) and also of a beloved mentor, Dean Lawrence Rose of The General Seminary (who felt it to be a sin to cross that body of water for the first time too quickly to ingest its grandeur and immensity).

Living in Philippine culture was a daily menu of surprises and insight, a continuous broadening of perspective, full of cross-cultural mishaps. My first sermon at St. Andrew's Seminary, as a new faculty member teaching New Testament and Pastoral Theology, began my education. I used the analogy of a gracious hostess who would extend herself to cover a table *faux pas* of a guest. Her self-emptying action was like God's caring concern for us when we make mistakes . . . or so I proclaimed. After the service, a seminarian politely asked me if I were new to the Philippines. "Why yes," I replied. After a pause, he informed me that Filipinos use the term "hostess" universally to refer to a "lady of the evening"! Lesson One was quickly followed by Lesson Two when I noticed a seminarian using a stick to catch an iguana in the brush outside the chapel wall. Wondering why he was going to so much trouble, I asked, "Is it dangerous, Silverio?" "Why no, Father; it makes for good eating back in my room."

It became quickly apparent that I needed to sharpen my acculturation skills if I ever hoped to understand the world in which my students lived. Kay, who was teaching art to both Filipino and international students at the American School in Manila, was feeling exactly the same. And so we decided that one good way to acculturate ourselves was to try to get our tongues around Basic Tagalog, the dominant dialect. Another way was to find some acculturation classes. Both were available at Ateneo de Manila, the Jesuit University. Soon we and our fellow students — some American Maryknoll Sisters — were struggling together to pronounce the Tagalog sounds so alien to our linguistic experience.

The acculturation classes proved to be especially rewarding. For example, Kay and I both had noticed similar characteristics in our Filipino students: they seemed to grasp things quickly and intuitively, but there also was a marked lack of feedback in class. Our acculturation classes helped us to understand that the Philippine "hospitality and politeness syndrome" makes it difficult for Filipinos to express oppositional views to anyone. Our students were accepting our word quickly and without discussion in order to avoid offending us.

Perhaps there is a related syndrome that allows Filipino children to sit quietly for long periods. “Father, your children are so moveable,” was a comment I often heard in the later years when all three of our children were with us. Indeed, Laura, Chris, and Jamie really were much more “moveable” than their Filipino childhood playmates!

My ministry in the Philippines changed from seminary faculty to work on behalf of the joint ministries of the Philippine Episcopal and Philippine Independent Churches, but my educational connection with the Ateneo continued to grow, leading to an M.A. in Cultural Anthropology. My thesis considered the challenges faced by Episcopal Filipino seminarians, all from the “Mountain Province” culture, as they moved down to the predominant Lowland Culture of the seminary. They, too, had crossed a border — I came to realize.

My first border crossing was an eight-year immersion in another world of deep family relationships and community values that would impress me for the rest of my life as I returned to the more individual focus of American life. It has led me to a deeper commitment to personal interconnectedness.

My second border crossing happened much more recently — in the past four years. As part of the continuing education requirements for licensure as a marriage and family therapist in Maine, my participation in conferences and readings in the field of contemplative neuroscience (an approach that integrates mindfulness meditation with brain science) has drawn me into the ongoing dialogue between those scientists and Buddhism. As I try to live into and learn from Buddhist thought, much as I did with Philippine culture, the results are leading me to a more profound understanding of myself as a Christian.

The writings of Paul Knitter, Professor of World Religions and Culture at Union Seminary in New York, have led me to use what he describes as the “Buddhist flashlight” in order to deepen my Christian faith. The image is apt because Buddhism — like the beam of a flashlight — is so strikingly “unitive.” I was experiencing the “Buddhist flashlight” when, during an eight-day Ignatian Retreat, the world became a unity in which everything around me was totally right. As Knitter points out, Buddhists use unfamiliar terms for their experience — Emptiness, Groundlessness, Interbeing — that are not so far removed from phrases in Christian mystical tradition, “one with Christ,” “Divine indwelling,” and “participants in the divine nature.” With this flashlight, I have a larger appreciation of the God-within and the Interconnectedness of all life that is central to Christian faith. Crossing over has led me to a more fulfilling understanding of my home ground. Now, in worship and private prayer, I use the traditional language of the God “up there,” while rejoicing in my newly-empowered relationship with the always-present Christian emphasis on the God-within each of us.

I hope that these experiences of learning more about my home base through living dialog with other worlds beyond my borders will keep me open to such growth in the future.



The Rev. Jim Gill lives with his three children in Winthrop, Maine, plus two of his four grandchildren. The other two grands, and three great-grands live in the Easton area of Pennsylvania, where Jim was rector of Trinity Church for over twenty years.