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Vignettes from the Vineyard

Helen Rolfson, OSF

I am very grateful to God for all the years I have been granted in the service of teaching people who have zeal for ministry. The privilege of teaching theology and spirituality makes me practically the luckiest person in the world, as well, for I get to spend my time where my heart is. Have I become a better teacher along the way, for all those years of practice? I only know that I learned a lot from my students and colleagues about pedagogy, but principally in teaching the way I would want to be taught as an adult learner. It has also been a joy to teach in a department where there have been little or no petty jealousies. The more one learns about academia, the more one realizes that colleagues at other institutions often have harrowing tales to tell of departmental in-fighting. Here, rather, I have benefited from a hospitable environment, made possible by large-spirited colleagues and administrators.

As a little girl, I got to know Saint John's by way of my Benedictine uncle. On a visit to him, it was thrilling to enter campus by way of a route through the woods, after which a view of the "twin towers" would emerge. Praying Vespers in what is now the Great Hall is also one of those memories that echo every time I pass through that hallowed space. (Even back then, it was clear that a bigger worship space was needed for the needs of the entire community!) I used to tell friends who would inquire about my having entered the Franciscans instead of the Benedictines that had I been masculine instead of feminine, I probably would have asked to enter Saint John's, as it always gave off the aura of signal beauty and the hospitable care given by many people. While I am a committed Franciscan (the celebration of my golden jubilee of profession is next year), I have a special spot in my heart for the Benedictine spirit, and it was thanks to the invitation of Sister Mary Anthony Wagner, OSB, then dean of theology here, that I entered the Saint John's scene to teach Liturgiology. (Never mind that I had to find out what that was.)

I later had the charge to join a committee investigating the feasibility of a Monastic Studies program here in the School of Theology. A consultation was held in a very blizzard-ridden January, in which many wise monastic men and women were invited to discuss the matter and give advice. The consultation opened with a dinner in the Centennial Room in the Quad. The invited guests were very demure and practically kept monastic silence as the dinner began. Then a bat flew in, and began to strafe the tables. That caused a certain fluster. Abbot Jerome stood up and flapped his scapular at the bat, driving it out the door. He sat down, with a satisfied smile for his show of leadership, only to see the bat fly in the other door and zoom even lower over the dinner tables. That led the assembled group to move *under* the tables. Abbot Jerome ousted the bat once more. This time it did not return. (It was found the next day in the dean's office.) That broke the ice, and conversations after that were quite spirited, to say the least. It also didn't hurt that the next general dinner was held in the Student Refectory at the same time as a hypnotism demonstration!

To make a long story short, we decided to run the program. The rest is history. The Monastic Studies Program was launched by a course in Monastic Spiritual Theology, which I was privileged to share with Father Jean Leclercq, OSB, renowned monastic scholar. He was a delight to work with, and would stuff every pocket in his habit with little papers on which he would write bibliography notes. Once he lent me a folder of some articles which were as yet unpublished. I promptly mislaid it, and spent an entire Sunday going through my office looking for it. I finally called him up to confess the loss, expecting thunder to rain on my head. But he was confident the folder would eventually show up, and assured me I shouldn't worry. The next day, it turned up, like the bat, in the foyer of the dean's office! I had absent-mindedly laid it down there before having a visit with the dean. I was left with a great amazement at Father Leclercq's detachment.

The chance to work with graduate students, most of whom were preparing for some form of ministry, was a joy. The January term course in Liturgy and the Arts brought tours to many area churches, as well as guests and artists to the class. Father Abbot Baldwin Dworschak was always on my schedule, as he would share the wonderful story of how the Abbey Church was built. I am so glad that we were able to make a video of his presentation before he died. Frank Kac-

marcik, used to tell us how unique the class was; he knew of no other seminary offering such training.

Christmas Eve and the Easter Vigil were always special moments to share in the Saint John's community. Some of us who lived off campus occasionally braved dreadful weather to get there. But one Easter Vigil eve, I came up the hill with scholars from the Ecumenical Institute, only to behold a fantastic display of Northern Lights flashing across the sky. We stood under the bell banner, watching, and just as the last bells were signaling time to enter the church, the aurora borealis faded away. Such good "liturgical planning" doesn't happen every day and we remained in awe of the spectacular show.

In our personal evaluations, faculty members are often asked to list their publications. That's all well and good, and as it should be, but somehow, I feel even prouder of the publications and public presentations of students or alums at learned societies. They do us all proud. I hope that my own scholarly work over the years has inspired my students to continue to outdo their professor. It has also been a source of much joy to learn that former students have gone on to teach, some of them right here at Saint John's.

Should I tell of some of the interruptions to scholarship that came about by fire? One of my little two-year old neighbors, in an apartment in St. Joseph, in the absence of his parents, put a package of cake mix on the stove burner and turned it up to high. It was just providence that I had not already left for the university. I always thought it would be fun to "break glass in case of fire." Well, I did just that, and put the fire out and rescued the screaming kid. A second occasion came when I called the fire department for an alarm going off on the apartment underneath me. The students living there, the firemen reported, had left a pan of something on the stove, and then left. I eventually moved to St. Cloud, where a few years later, the apartment building burned down. Someone had dropped cigarette ashes into a bag containing Christmas decorations on their balcony. My biggest worry as I sat on the lawn watching the spread of the fire from apartment to apartment and along the roof was the pile of comprehensive exams lying on the dining table, as well as my air ticket to Kalamazoo. I was fortunate in that I lost little by way of smoke or water damage, and all my neighbors were safe. Generous friends took me in, giving me their sewing room as a refuge until I could move to another residence. And in my next place of residence, I awoke about 3:00 one morning, hearing what sounded like an apartment smoke alarm nearby, and smelling smoke. Investigation revealed that it was coming from the apartment immediately below me. After banging on

the door and getting no response, I called 911, and the firemen were out in a matter of minutes. The occupant had made popcorn in the microwave (source of the fire), and then had a stroke and became unconscious as he went for the door. So, soon he was off to the hospital on a stretcher. The poor man eventually died, as he never did recover from the event. At Saint John's, I was astounded to read in the *Record* the log of near-daily responses to smoke alarms on campus! I am grateful to be in a place with its own fire department! I can tell you that the threat of fire wreaks havoc on my powers of concentration.

One of the joys of living and working in the Saint John's environment has been intellectual stimulus afforded by the many resources of such a university as ours. Let me just mention the friendship with many scholars from the Ecumenical Institute. These creative individuals have shared and continue to share the fruit of their labors and their sabbatical "leisure" in a very generous way. When I was on sabbatical myself once, I told myself I would then take the opportunity to go to concerts and lectures with great abandon, as so often the pressures of work hindered me from taking advantage of the many opportunities of enrichment right here on our campus "behind the pine curtain." Well, to my astonishment, I found at the university where I had settled for the semester's research little cultural opportunity at all! It made me doubly grateful to come back to the Saint John's-Saint Ben's area, where I could at least feast occasionally at the rich banquet that is offered here. One comes back with new eyes and learns "to see the place for the first time" (T.S. Eliot). Not only is there great opportunity here, culturally speaking, but it is consistently on a professional level.

I will not give vignettes of all the rich years here. The past years were not all "ups" nor were they all "downs." They contained the normal mixture of joys and sadnesses, as we still await the Parousia. I mention some of the myriad things that have made me very grateful for the chance to serve God here, in this place, at this time. †