

Traveling Companion: An Animal House Email

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During the past few years, my email ministry has grown. Many people, initially afraid to approach a priest on a person to person basis, continue to use email as a way of broaching a problem, subject or situation they find difficult to deal with.

Over the years, many of these initial email contacts have continued for months and even years. In the beginning, people wanted to find out if I cared enough to answer their initial email. When I did answer, they gradually opened up and shared their hurt, anger, frustration and troubling questions. Eventually, in many cases, some healing took place.

Recently, I received an email from "The Animal House." Obviously, my first thought was the National Lampoon movie of the same name. I also thought the email might be something disguised as a spam, not the kind you eat in dire circumstances. The subject matter indicated, "Just saying 'Hi.'" Curiosity and possibility peaked my interest and I opened the email. It read, "Father Tracey: A greeting from Jamaica - my father, Michael (last name), was born in ... I have been in Jamaica for 25 years and am a writer. As well, I founded and run an animal shelter (hence my e-mail address:) Kindest regards. Maureen (last name)."

Maureen's last name was familiar and the place of birth of her father happened to be my home village in Ireland. Compelled by my curiosity, I responded to her email. I asked her one question: How did you find my email address? I told her that, as a little kid growing up in Ireland, I went to a farm auction. I had vivid memories of the auction and how one of my uncles bought some of the tools being auctioned. The property being auctioned belonged to a person with Maureen's last name. I asked her if this person might be related to her.

A return email confirmed my curiosity. Maureen wrote: "Well, the auction you were at was that of my grandfather's belongings. What a coincidence. My father left the village when he was 16 - and his brothers, as well as sister left shortly thereafter." She also indicated that she found my name by googling it on the web.

I continue to email Maureen and she continues to respond. I am not sure where a chance email may lead in the future.

Yesterday, I received an email from Barbara in North Carolina. The subject line read "A Mother's love." It read. "I found the words to this lovely Irish song from my own childhood by searching the Internet. which in turn led me to your web site. I lost my mother in 1999, but it feels like yesterday. Even though she was 89, it broke my heart. A day doesn't go by that I don't cry a bit, or reflect on my sense of loss. I know she is in a better place, as our Faith tells us, but the sense of separation crushes me, still. Thank you for your kind words and I wish I could say the song cheered me, but as you can imagine, it pulled at my heart. You see, even as a child my mother used to sing that song to me and I used to laugh and say, Oh Mom, give it a rest! Sing something "with it" or happy! Now those words haunt me

I am always amazed how chance encounters can develop into mysterious encounter with a God who continues to surprise us. I marvel at times I find myself in the right place at the right time and the encounters were not of my planning.

I remember in the immediate aftermath of Katrina, when phone services were chaotic, how surprise phone calls or emails let to person to person encounters which continue to surprise us as graced moments by our God.

I just noticed I received another email from "The Animal House." I need to check on Maureen and see what the Lord is continuing to do through this chance encounter.