

Stumbling along

Sitting down at dinner one evening, my niece asked me: “How did you know you wanted to be a priest?” How do you answer such a question? One can get a bit philosophical, a bit theological, and a bit reflective. Or, in typical Irish fashion, you can answer one question, by asking another, like asking her, “How will you know Mr. Right for you when you meet him?” I suppose the short answer, but not the complete one, is: “You know.”

Behind the “know” is a multitude of journeys, experiences, encounters, directing, faith enhancing moments that become the ingredients of “you know.”

Can one name one moment, one encounter, one disappointment, one blessing in disguise that would answer her question? Then again, if you can name such, does it not eliminate its mystery? Is not naming something a shorthand to something greater? Yet, at the same time, does it not speak of some kind of relationship.

When God created Adam, he asked him to give names to all the cattle, all the animals and Adam obliged. God gave him a certain privilege, power and authority by allowing him to name names.

Yet, when the people in the Old Testament asked God to share with them His name; reluctantly, he volunteered – “I Am Who Am.” Still the mystery continued.

Maybe, we are reluctant to name things because, not only are we probing its mystery but are also giving it a certain power that demands an ownership, a relationship and a commitment to its deeper mystery.

Someone once said that you live life forward but understand it backwards. It is only by careful reflection on the past bits and pieces, the past beginnings and endings, the past encounters and missed opportunities that one begins to discover the tapestry that the Mystery One is continuing to weave through the fibers of our lives. We continue to stumble along knowing that the Master Weaver continues to open the door as he choose the design, stitch and pattern that continues to evolve into the finished product.

I remember reading, author, Joseph Campbell’s, *Reflections on the Art of Living* “Where you stumble, there lies your treasure. The very cave you are afraid to enter turns out to be the source of what you are looking for.”

I thought about his idea of stumbling upon the cave where one finds the treasure. I thought about the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in nineteen, forty seven, in a cave and how it revolutionized biblical studies.

But Campbell’s cave has a two-pronged implication. A cave is both a shelter and a shadow. It is both a shelter where one can pause and discover the treasure; while, at the same time, realizing that the treasure has its shadow side with still to be explored mystery. Maybe that is why, down through the centuries, monasteries, became centres of hospitality where pilgrims found shelter on their journeys, while, at the same time, were given an opportunity to discover more of their own shadow side.

I am not sure what prompted my niece to ask the question but I do know that we have journeyed together to many places, including to Mississippi. Driving along, we have chatted about many things. I introduced her to some of my friends along the way. We talked about the many twists and turns along the way I encountered. We talked about interesting people I met along the way as well as challenging situations I had no choice but to embrace. We talked about how plans I made along the way became derailed and how the hand of someone greater had better judgment and wisdom.

As I think about her question, I realize that it has many names that make up the chapters of my life. After all, we are the stories we tell about ourselves but we are much more than the stories. To live well is to tell stories. After all, that is what Jesus did.

As we continue to tell stories about ourselves, the stories keep multiplying as the story changes and, if the story doesn’t change, the teller does.

A simple “you know” may be an escape from providing a satisfactory answer to her question. But, then again, “you know” is just an ever changing capsule full of mystery.

Like Joseph Campbell, we enter the cave both to shelter and discover the shadow – all part of our ongoing story that we will only discover in eternity - the full implications of our “you know” with all its mystery.