

## Closing the curtain

It all began during a trip from Shannon, Ireland to John F. Kennedy airport in New York. It was the summer of 1976. Flying on Aer Lingus at 36,000 feet, I sat beside a middle aged woman called Kathleen. It was Kathleen's first flight. She was heading to New York to meet some family member that she hadn't seen in decades.

Obviously her nervousness showed itself as she engaged me in conversation. Some time later, the flight attendants arrived with the beverage cart. Kathleen accepted a miniature bottle of Irish Whiskey to calm her nerves. She opened it and poured it over a plastic cup of ice.

Following the meal, she asked one of the flight attendants for some airline stationary. She searched her pocketbook for a pen, then lowered the tray table and began to write. She wrote about her experience on her first flight. The letter would be mailed in New York and send to her family back in Ireland. I hoped that she might write something about that nice, young priest who was sitting beside her on the flight.

On arriving back in Mississippi, I sat down to pen my first column and called it "Keeping in Touch." Months earlier, Mrs. Janna Avalon, then and now editor of the state Catholic newspaper, "Mississippi Today," had invited me to become a regular columnist for the newspaper. So, in September 1976, a journey began.

"Rambling Rhetoric" became the byline for the columns during the next several years. This scripting journey continued through the establishment of the Diocese of Biloxi in June 1977 when I became the liaison between the new diocese and "Mississippi Today."

Some time later, I began a regular column for the newly established newspaper for the Diocese of Biloxi. My columns, using the byline of "Traveling Companion," has continued for decades.

As I think back over more than three decades and over a thousand columns, I have had the opportunity to wax some rhetoric as I rambled through my days into the lives and hearts of so many people. I have been privileged to invite my readers to travel with me as companions through the highways and byways of life, gaining wisdom and insight with each turn on the road,

I know I have been blessed with a gift that I have tried to hone over the years. Sometimes, my columns percolate while I am riding my bike at 3 a.m. in the morning. Other times, they germinate at moments, encounters and occasions that surprise me. I have been very lucky never to have to miss a deadline. I have always been blessed with having several columns in reserve for the times when creativity bypasses me.

Through the years, I have met so many people who thanked me for sharing some insights along the way. I have ministered to people in many and varied ways and they have found themselves written about in a column or two because their faith, their story needed to be shared. I have met others who dared me to write about them and, in most cases, I respected their wishes. In shopping malls and stores, I have encountered people who have said, "I know you. I would recognize you from your picture in Gulf Pine." Sometimes, they have said, "You haven't changed a bit." I accept it graciously and move on.

Others have told me graciously that the first page they turn to in the paper is page 5. When I take a hiatus for a while, they asked, "I looked for your column but you were not there. What happened?" I explain to them about my hiatus and some time to put on my creative hat and generate some more columns.

Now it is time to let the credits roll before the final column curtain call. I am indebted to Mrs. Janna Avalon who recognized a talent and gave me so many opportunities to express it. I am also indebted to Mrs. Mary Wimberly and Mrs. Shirley Henderson, former editors of "Gulf Pine Catholic" for their willingness to allow me to be part of a great adventure. Finally, to the neophyte editor, Terry Dickson, who has shared lots of wisdom and meals with us, I thank him for his openness and new adventure.

As the curtain closes with this last column, I thank all whom I had the privilege of sharing some rambling rhetoric with and inviting them to join me as traveling companions through the recent decades.