

My Summer Sabbatical: Phase 1 of 5 – Disengagement

By The Rev. Peter K. Ackerman

This entry will be the first of at least five memoir pieces sharing with the parish my sabbatical experiences. The whole experience was magnificent and offered more than I expected. As you might recall, I obtained a grant offered to clergy with the express direction that they use it to disengage from their vocational call. My grant's thesis was "to disengage, by reengaging with other parts of my life that bring me joy." To do this, I planned trips to Liverpool, England; Maine; and Los Angeles, California.

Expected as part of the sabbatical was some intentional time devoted to disengaging and re-engaging. My first offering to you is about the disengagement which, while not as exciting on paper as the main adventures of the sabbatical, was just as important.

Becoming open to the movement of the Spirit and/or life was an important outcome from my time away. This education began with my first disengagement trip from the congregation. Originally I was planning to go by train to a monastery in New York. All looked well until I received the disappointing news from Amtrak that a connecting station on my trip was down for repairs. If I were to honor my tickets I would be forced to take a cab to rush to another station to catch another train. Knowing that our rail system does not run like clockwork, I felt that I needed to alter this first trip. Shrine Mont, where we do our parish retreats, presented a solution, as it was available in late May (when I began my Sabbatical with a vacation week) since it was not in "camp" mode yet. I had a wonderful house all to myself, next to the tennis courts, right at the shore of the large pond. That was all a plus. I was alone for this trip, and taking long walks around the water or sitting on the porch of the house to read were wonderful ways to relax and disengage.

The downside was the same as the upside...I was alone! Since there were no events at Shrine Mont that week, after 3 p.m. when the offices closed, I was the only “customer” on the mountain. It was spooky to say the least. In the 1980s I used to take dates to scary movies that began with this very premise. Perhaps partly because of that, after my first night there I did not sleep well.

Frequently I had nightmares. In summary, these were about shortcomings I felt in myself or challenging times I have faced since ordination. I prayed over the subsequent days for God to reveal to me what was going on, and through a marvelous dream I had my answer. This time away from my life as I knew it, and my vocation, provided me with space to clearly purge that which I was hanging onto. My ethereal dream that concluded this phase of my retreat included angelic beings handing me a large chalice. I was told that it was “the sabbatical” and drinking the thick, cool, quenching liquid I felt a calm spiritual cleansing throughout my body.

From this point of refreshment, I was joined by Marie, who was able to take time from her new, busy job to join me for a brief second phase of this disengagement week. We spent two days and one night in the Shenandoah mountains, where we engaged in light hiking and relaxation.

My sabbatical grant was clear that in addition to travel, I was to spend time at home. There I kept myself busy. Marie and I continue a two-year-long (so far) slow downsizing. This summer I finally hit my bookshelves and began selling some of my autographed items on eBay. It has been fun getting to know other collectors and the fellows at my local UPS Store where I do my shipping.

Additionally, during my sabbatical I was able to finish a solid first draft of my book about growing up in the household with my Hollywood parents. This draft I sent to a friend for an overall commentary, and brought to my mother for her comments. Now, having received the feedback I sought, I am back to updating the draft, which I hope will then be ready for professional proofreading and submission to the literary agent who requested the work from me.

As many of you know, I enjoy writing. There are so many stories of my previous “Hollywood” life that I hope to put down. Some of these are in the aforementioned book about my parents, and I hope to place others into a follow-up work answering the oft-asked question, “How did you get from Hollywood to the priesthood?” In addition, I enjoy creative writing. Though I take the advice of a writing mentor and only work on one piece at a time, I did come up with two fictional ideas during sabbatical. In one I have some specific characters, and now I have to figure out what to do with them! Ideas hit me once in a while, and I note those in the file for that story. Similarly, I’ve had another set of characters in mind since the early 1990’s. At that time, a friend and I were thinking of writing a faux documentary featuring these people, but we never got past the early stages of talking about it, and he went on to direct a horror film. Now I know what to do with these characters, in the shape of a fiction novel. Who knows when I will have the time to write all of these tales, but I do enjoy this manner of immersing myself in creativity.

Another large part of stepping away from my vocation was deciding where to attend Sunday services! My favorite, the Washington National Cathedral’s 9:00 a.m. service, was only available for two or three weeks before they went onto their summer schedule. This service takes place in the High Altar area. Congregants sit in the stalls, and the presiders stand at either side of the space between the worshippers, until the Eucharist when they go up to the altar. What makes

this service special is the jazz choir comprised of instruments and singers. It was sublime. Should I one day retire and have Sundays off, this might become my regular service.

In early summer I enjoyed a wonderful surprise at the Cathedral. Once the 9:00 a.m. service was no longer available, I decided to try the 8:00 a.m. service held at the side altar. On that particular Sunday, a dear friend, The Reverend Canon Preston Hannibal, presided and preached. Preston and I have a long connection. When I was a lay person in southern California, I served at the altar with his father, The Rev. Belfield Hannibal, an inspiring African American priest and preacher, shortly before his death. Additionally, and before I knew either of those men, I went to high school with their respective son and brother – Jeff! Seeing Preston in action inspired me to contact my high school friend Jeff, and we enjoyed a nice long-distance reunion.

There are many good preachers in the Episcopal Church. My vocation gives me insider knowledge of who they are, so I spent many Sundays at the early service of Christ Church, Old Town, Alexandria, where I heard The Reverend Noelle York-Simmons (their rector). She is a magnificent preacher and probably my favorite in the area. Sometimes I attended a Saturday evening service at a local Roman Catholic Church, where during communion they engage in a “don’t ask, don’t tell,” thus availing non-Roman Catholics like me to partake in the elements during Eucharist. Though having met one of their priests at a movie theater and told him my story, I think he gave me a disapproving glance as I left one of the services! Finally, an easy choice for me (if Noelle was not preaching) was to go up the street from my home to the 8:00 a.m. service of my former parish, Immanuel Church on the Hill, Alexandria.

It might surprise you to learn that when I am on vacation, I usually wear a collar to services, as it helps people to know that they need not invite me to join their church. However, I

found early on in my sabbatical that going to worship with clericals while off for three months did not seem right. So for the first time in a decade I actually had to buy some shirts and ties!

As I hope you can see, the worship part of my sabbatical was full, as were my beginning weeks. Next time I will share with you some memories from Marie's and my trip to Liverpool, England, which turned out to offer us much more than the Beatle experiences we went there for!