

Conveners Corner

By Paul Koch, Co-Convener of Illuman of the Ozarks

I call 2015 “My Year of Brokenness.” A thousand little nicks were manifesting as deep wounds. My brother, Jack Nobles, said to me, “Hey, there’s an event in the North Woods of Minnesota called the Men’s Rites of Passage. I have already rented a car; it looks like something I need. Will you come with me?”

Years later, Jack let it slip that this was just his ploy to rescue me. Unbeknownst to him, transformation found Jack and the most beautiful, generous, generative man would emerge. As for me, MROP, a couple of returns as an Initiator, three Soularizes, various special retreats, and numerous Council circles have all helped me claim fully this crazy notion of *Falling Upward*. I have found my peace.

Jack and I are now Co-Conveners of Illuman of the Ozarks, a Chapter full of incredible brothers in Missouri, Arkansas, Kansas, Tennessee, Illinois, and Indiana, meeting physically outside St. Louis at Rockhaven Ecozoic Center. I have been dedicated to men’s work since seminary. My Doctor of Ministry project focused on trying to discover who I was too. It was titled, *When the Gym Is a Man’s Church: Spiritual Quests for Identity, Discipline, and Community*. I have led years-long community men’s groups and annual retreats, but my involvement in many endeavors and aspects of Illuman fulfills everything. Now, I look for ways to intersect and cross-pollinate.

As a Regional Minister in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), a calling I received in late 2015—and only because of needed healing at MROP—I strive to reach men, particularly those stuck in familiar ways of religion or for whom faith seems exclusionary or frightening. Illuman helps me unite strands of purpose, belonging, joy, and especially brotherly Love in every Universal context.

A project for Illuman of the Ozarks in 2022, after finally being able to convene in person once again, will be to plan, with contribution from wise Illuman partners, a First Rites of Passage for middle school boys and their “unsuspecting” fathers and male mentors who perhaps think they are there only to chaperone. This will be held at Shannondale, a favorite 4,000-acre forested retreat center deep in the Ozarks wilderness, where our Chapter gathers for annual retreats in a gorgeous National Park setting.

Without hesitation, I thank the many Illuman leaders, Richard Rohr, and fellow travelers in brokenness and restoration for helping me believe I am heading to discover “the secret of life.” I cannot wait to live as the Holy Fool in my spiritual journey—skipping down the sidewalk in my bathrobe, singing my heart out.

