John Courtney Murray Award

I want to first express to all of you and to Paul Lakeland in particular my deep gratitude for this award. I have known about this evening now for 8 months and I have been greatly consoled by the honor you show me. I can and will assure you that I never imagined this and I am very grateful for it.

I’m here with you my colleagues, friends and even former and present students. I am also here with my sister Jean, my sister Deb and her husband Gary, and my cousin Michael. I appreciate so much their presence with us tonight.

In October, Paul Lakeland left me a phone message saying he wanted to talk with me. When we finally connected, my recollection of the conversation goes something like this.

“Hi Jim, Glad we could finally connect. I want to talk with you about the John Courtney Murray award?”

“Great! I have a few nominations for you.”

“No Jim, I want to talk with you about the award.”

“Oh, **you** want to tell me your nominations first?”

“No Jim, I want to talk with **you** about the award.”

“Ok, Paul, I’m confused. Who do you want to go first with his list, me or you?”

“Jim, the award’s for you”

“No Paul, you’re mistaken, no not me.”

“Yes you.”

“Paul, I’m simply stunned. You’ve knocked off my feet.“

“I’m glad someone could knock you off your feet.”

Since then, I thought of what I wanted to share with you and what I would like to share is what I have learned about being connected and how being connected empowers people to find their voice. I want to share with you three significant moments in my life where I learned that by being connected people are empowered to find their voice.

I was told many times by my parents that as a child, I did not make any sense. It wasn’t simply an extended sense of baby talk. I could not find the words to express myself. While most children can say 20 words by 18 months and 50 words by 24 months, I said quite a lot of things in my first two years, but none with words that made any sense. In fact later in grammar school and high school, after my first major breakthrough, I still struggled repeatedly with self expression, often hearing one of my classmates say “what Jim is trying to say,” an expression I often heard during my first twelve years of schooling.

But back to those first few years. Until I was 4 my parents continually took me to doctors who simply said, give him time. That’s when I had my breakthrough. What was it

On my first birthday, my newborn brother Bobby came home from the hospital, born 360 days after me. Bobby, as I was always told, was my first birthday present.

In time actually my brother became my translator: When he was two and I was three, our mom would ask, do you want to go out to play, I would say some complicated stuff, my mother would look to Bobby, who would say Jimmy says we will go out in 20 minutes. Though it took a few years, my brother Bobby, by being connected to me, helped me find my voice so that I could connect with others. After playing and talking with him, he helped me to find ways to make sense with others.

As boys, Bobby and I were inseparable. We had our own room where we slept in bunk beds and talked the night away, we celebrated our birthdays together, dressed up for Halloween and All Saints Day, shared our friends, welcomed our sister Deb, and later Sean and Jean, but all and all we knew that together we were a team.

Bobby and I did become separable and I have deep and abiding regrets about that. But during these 6 past months that I have lived in Rome, I kept coming back to how close Bobby and I were as children and how he helped me to get connected to others by helping me find my voice.

The second moment I want to share with you is when I founded Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church. I actually got the idea when I invited faculty from both the Gregorian University and the Alfonsianum University together for a dinner with me and Steve Pope who was visiting Rome at the time. The Roman professors had never met one another and there I learned again what I learned from Bobby, that by being connected we empower one another to find our voice.

I realized I could connect others so that they could find their voice. One of the great phenomena of our time is how networks or organizations help us to find our voices. Theologically, our world is richer because of our many networks. WE are more empowered to speak truth to power because of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, the Ecclesia of Women of Asia, the Academy of Catholic Hispanic Theologians of the United States (ACHTUS), The Black Catholic Theological Symposium (BCTS), CELAM, Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church, the Ecclesiological Investigations International Research Network, the International

Network of Societies for Catholic Theology (INSeCT), Concilium, the SCE, the AAR, and the CTSA. These networks connect us to one another and therein we are empowered to find our voice and to accompany others as they find theirs.

Finally, let me conclude on a key moment when I learned how important to my own life it was for me to do what Bobby did, that is, accompany another to empower them to find their voice.

In 2008, I discovered a lump that prompted me to see my GP who sent me to a surgeon whom I saw on a Friday and who said that my melanoma had returned and that I was no longer at stage 1, but either at a stage 3 or stage 4. He added, “We need to do a biopsy on Monday.” I told him, “On Monday, I’m flying to Manila for a conference that I am hosting with a colleague.” He said, “Are you kidding?” I said, “No, I have to go to Manila.” “All right, in all probability, you have been walking around with this cancer for two years. Another week won’t change anything. When you come back, I’m doing the biopsy.”

Needless to say, the trip was incredibly challenging (You can ask Lisa Fullam and Bill O’Neil who were there at the conference; they can tell you all about it).

Still, one day, after having given a lecture across the city at the Ateneo de Manila’s medical school, I was returning to the Ateneo’s main campus and was caught in incredible traffic by the Ateneo’s main gate. As I sat there with begging children knocking on my taxi’s window and watching mothers trying to secure their children as they crossed this enormous and dangerous intersection and seeing men, swatting at flies, as they headed home, shirtless and muddied by their heavy labors, I finally faced the question, do I really have terminal cancer? At that intersection, that I had seen so many times during my 7 teaching stints in Manila, while asking that question, I had an epiphany and realized that whatever my health situation was, it was nothing compared to those children, the mothers and the laborers whom I now so clearly saw. By being connected to their lot, I accepted my own.

I eventually got back to my room, resolved to face what lay ahead. I asked myself, in three days, you will either be stage 4 or stage 3, either way, what have you achieved with your life to this point? I thought, “Dear God, I’m not going to write down a list of my articles and books.” As I thought of what I had done with my life, I found myself writing on a piece of paper the names of the doctoral students I was or had directed, like Maria Cimperman, Lisa Fullam, Marilyn Martone, Chris Vogt, Mary Jo Iozzio, Dan Daly, Lucas Chan, Kathryn Getek, Azsetop Jacquineau, Mark Graham, John Ghansah, Ylan Tran, Stan Alla, Steve Miles, Edwin Vasquez, Kathy Bozzuti Jones, Ritchie Genilo, Peter Pojol, and others. These were the one I had directed or was directing until the interruption by cancer in 2008; since then I directed another 14 students... many here tonight.

I carried that list with me for the next 16 months as I underwent extensive surgery, interferon, and a host of other treatments.

Now today, putting together these remarks, only now do I realize that by Bobby helping me find my voice, I have always wanted to help others find theirs. And I think that’s really most of what I do: whether mentoring or networking, I try to empower others to find their voice as I continue to find my own.

So thank you. I am very honored. Let us stay connected to one another and let us help one another as we try to imagine and express a more loving world and a more loving church.