

## Believing and Belonging: My Collegeville Experience

Last July, I attended a weeklong writer's workshop for poets at the Collegeville Institute.

I applied after hearing about Collegeville from a couple of bloggers I read. But by the time I received an acceptance email, I was unsure if Collegeville was the right place for me. After all, it was a Christian ecumenical institute. By that point, I'd lost my desire to break into the spiritual/Christian writer/blogger world, I'd given up on my spiritual memoir, and any poems I wrote about God/spirituality were full of cynicism. In fact, I was wondering if I was even a Christian at all anymore.

What would Collegeville be like? Would it be full of people who said, "Praise the Lord!" after every other sentence? Would they accept a faith wrestler like me? Would they hate my poems? Would I belong?

Long story short: I belonged.

For the first time in a long time, I felt like I belonged in a group of spiritual people. There was a woman in training to be an Episcopal priest, a Benedictine monk, a Catholic nun, two Mennonites, a few Catholics, and a self-described pagan. So yes, lots of religious people were there, but it didn't feel like a coming together to praise God without question, or a place to act like you have it all together.

It felt like a place to be broken. A place to be honest. A place where a mask could fall away, and you could be your whole, real self. Poetry does that. Poetry is a safe place to explore the tough stuff

of life: grief, disappointment, fear, rage, faith, doubt, broken hearts. Poetry is where we re-live the most painful or joyous moments in our lives. Poetry is where we wrestle with the hardest questions humans face: Why do we suffer? How do we love? What can save us?

Someone wrote about her parents' deaths. Someone wrote about wanting to know his father. Someone wrote a poem of rage toward another person. Someone wrote about the death of a baby. Someone wrote letters about life for his young sons.



Karissa Knox Sorrell is a poet and educator from Nashville, Tennessee. Her writing has been seen in a variety of places, including *Think Christian*, *St. Katherine Review*, *Relief: A Christian Literary Expression*, and *Rock & Sling* blog. Find her on Twitter @KKSorrell.

People cried. I cried. Every time someone cried, our leader, poet Michael Dennis Browne, said, "Tears are a sign of strength."

One day Michael asked us to write about faith. We left our names off our pieces and put them in a box. Then each person drew a sheet of paper out of the box and read it aloud. Almost every essay about faith included doubt and pain. I just sat there, weeping, thinking: I am not alone. I am not alone.

I am not alone.

I began to see that writing, for me, is a spiritual act. At its core, it's an act of belief: Believing that my views are worth examining and fleshing out into words. Believing that my words have meaning. Believing that the conflicting thoughts and feelings within humans ought to be examined and captured in words. Believing that the world is open to me, and it is full of beauty.

As a writing workshop, Collegeville was awesome. I got feedback on my poems, and Michael Dennis Browne is an extraordinary teacher.

But Collegeville was far more than a writing workshop. Collegeville touched my spirit deeply. Collegeville made me feel something that I haven't felt in a long time. Collegeville made me hungry for something. God? Spirituality? Meaning? I can't say.

I still struggle with Christian dogmas. I still question God's existence and, if he exists, whether or not he intervenes in our world. I wonder if prayer matters or works.

I haven't found the answers to these questions—and I haven't stopped questioning. But Collegeville gave me the hope that I can be a spiritual person. That I can wonder if God is real and at the same time think I've found him as I walk through the woods. That I can sit in the tension and the paradoxes and know that it's okay. That I can find a place to fit. That no matter how many teachings I reject or question, I still can be accepted by people of God.

**Fr. Wilfred Retires**



Anybody who has been around Saint John's Abbey or University campus, the Collegeville Institute, or a Johnnie athletic event for any real

length of time knows **Fr. Wilfred Theisen, OSB**. How can one not? He's affable, loveable, and hospitable. He's congenial, kind, and charming. He's witty, noisy, and fun-loving. And he's a straight shooter.

Have a question about Johnnie football players? Wilfred knows who's playing well, who's hurt, and who's expected to have a great season. Wondering about where the Catholic Church stands on women's ordination? Wilfred will tell you. Curious about the architecture of the Abbey Church? Wilfred will relate details about it's construction from his first-person witness and experience.

Wilfred is retiring from his position as Saint John's Abbey/Collegeville Institute liaison, a position he has held for, well, forever (40 years).

He is one of Saint John's great storytellers, so to turn the tables, we share

below three Wilfred stories for you to enjoy, all from former Collegeville Institute scholars and residents.

*"Thank you for your years of service. We remember when we were in residence during my sabbatical leave, you returned from a trip to England where you were for several weeks. You reported that your trip was 'to check out a footnote.' We have remembered that with fondness and have used your statement ourselves from time to time."*  
**Ted Stoneberg**, Spring 1994

*"On my arrival at the Collegeville Institute, Wilfred asked me if I needed anything. 'As a matter of fact, I do,' I said. 'I am going to play the part of a Jesuit priest next summer and I need a photo of me in costume by tomorrow.' Wilfred said, 'Here take my habit,' and before I knew it he got out of his habit, rolled it up, handed it to me, and said, 'A Jesuit wouldn't need the scapular, would he?' Speed like that doesn't come from mere talent nor simply from practice, but only from a big heart."*  
**Shelly Matthews and George Frein** (2004/05, Spring 2015)

*"During my first residency, Wilfred asked if I'd like to attend a Johnnie basketball game with him. I went. I had heard about his love of Johnnie sports, but I wasn't expecting what I saw – or more accurately, heard – him do at this game. Just about every time the John-*

*nies brought the ball down the court, Wilfred would pound – and I mean really pound – the bleachers with his hand, while at the same time bellowing in a loud voice 'Go, Johnnies! Go Johnnies!' So I'm sitting next to this cas-socked monk, whom I didn't really know all that well at the time, in a noisy basketball arena, on a vibrating bleacher seat, with the sound of 'Go, Johnnies' ringing in my ear, not really sure if this was typical or if I needed to say something to someone.*

*Seven years later, when I returned, this time with my wife, I told her that one thing we absolutely had to do during our stay was to attend a Johnnie basketball game with Wilfred. I hinted to her that she would be in for a unique spectating experience.*

*We went. Wilfred did not disappoint!"*  
**Dave and Lauren Matz**  
 (Fall 2004, Fall 2011)



**The Book Nook**

Resident Scholar, **Richard (Rick) Gaillardetz's** most recent book, *An Unfinished Council: Vatican II, Pope Francis, and the Renewal of Catholicism* will be released next month by Liturgical Press.

**Catherine Clifford**, who will join us as a Resident Scholar during spring semester 2016 wrote about Rick's book, "*The Second Vatican Council awakened Catholic consciousness to the time-conditioned nature of the church as a human community led through history toward its final fulfillment by the*

*dynamic of God's Spirit. As such, it will always be an unfinished building project. Building on this metaphor, Rick invites us to consider the unfinished business of receiving the council's central insights, developing a synthetic reading of its teaching apt to inform the pastoral life and mission- al witness of Catholics in today's world. He argues convincingly that Pope Francis presents Catholics with a fuller integration of Vatican II's enduring significance for our time, especially in his holistic vision of the church as a community*

*of missionary disciples, confidently assuming responsibility for humble self-examination, ongoing renewal and reform, dialogical engagement within the church and with others, proclaiming the mercy and justice of God. Superbly written, [this is] a balanced, creative, and insightful reading of the challenges and opportunities facing contemporary Catholicism."*

Rick and his spouse, Diana, will be in residency until the end of fall semester.

