

Introduction of Kathleen Norris at Collegeville Institute 50th Anniversary Dinner

Centenary Room, Saint John's University, April 27, 2017

by Patrick Henry

I met Kathleen Norris 27 years ago, in Yankton, South Dakota, where both of us were on the program of the American Benedictine Academy. We were honored to be asked to speak, as non-monastics who had found among the Benedictines wisdom of inexhaustible breadth and depth.

This was before Kathleen Norris was “Kathleen Norris.” I make no pretense to being a prophet, but I had a pretty good intuition when I suggested to Kathleen that she should apply to the Institute's Resident Scholars Program.

On her application she identified herself as "Freelance writer; North Dakota Council on the Arts, Artist in Residence; Faculty, Great Plains Institute of Theology; lay preacher, Presbyterian churches in Lemmon and Keldron, South Dakota"—in other words, not your standard associate professor at the university.

What attracted her to Collegeville, she said, was her own story of a journey back to church. "I stumbled upon a Benedictine abbey [Assumption Abbey in Richardton, North Dakota] and against all odds—I'm married, a feminist, have a thoroughly Protestant background and a myriad of doubts—I found that the abbey choir was the one place where faith seemed possible for me. I see a useful connection: just as it is in the process of writing I discover what it is I need to say, so it is in the Divine Office I begin to discover what it is I believe."

The rest is theological and religious and spiritual history. Kathleen completed *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography* while at the Institute the first time, and in her second stay she collected the impressions, the conversations, the insights that fuel *The Cloister Walk*. I said earlier she wasn't your standard associate professor at the university. However, she subsequently served for a decade on the Saint John's University Board of Regents, and received the university's Colman J. Barry Award for Distinguished Contributions to Religion and Society.

There have been other books, poems, lectures—but you can learn that at her Wikipedia page.

I want to identify what I believe to be Kathleen's special gifts to all of us.

She names and illustrates the dipping and darting of faith, the staggers, lurches, glides, Möbius strips, U-turns, pirouettes, M. C. Escher stairways, and surprises of faith. She shows what faith is like, she doesn't just tell us what it is—or rather, she tells, but it's stories she tells, not systems or dogmas. She validates the wisdom her readers already have but may never have known was theology.

Emily Dickinson instructs us to “tell all the truth but tell it slant.” Kathleen does this all the time. My favorite of all her fresh, provocative, illuminating phrases is one from *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*. In an age when everybody is reaching for “higher consciousness,” she calls her book a “search for lower consciousness.” In the topsy-turvy world of the imagination, the lower is, of course, really the higher.

But: You came to hear Kathleen, not to hear about her. Here, from her home in what we've recently learned to identify as “an island in the Pacific,” she is.