

An Autobiography by William DeBiase, OFM

March 2018

As I was writing this brief autobiography, there was a thought lingering in my psyche that I could not identify. Then it occurred to me: this is everyone's story. The exact details may vary, but the finger of God is writing a story for us all. We see this in the surprises of life, those quiet moments when we hear a voice.

Growing up in Queens, N.Y., during the late 1940s and early '50s was comfortable. In the section of Queens in which I lived, there was a culture – perhaps a certain communal attitude would be a better way of describing it. We all shared the same basic values, e.g., just about everyone went to church on Sunday morning. Everyone got dressed to the nines for that. Borrowing a cup of sugar from your neighbor whom you knew by first name was common. You even knew some of the people on the street.

Teenagers had a sub-culture all their own. The foundation was the “corner.” Everyone had a corner. It was the place where you shared life, and learned, albeit crudely, to listen. It was the place of hopes. The corner was the place where you walked the path between boyhood and a certain degree of maturity. It was a boy's only place. The question “What corner do you hang out on?” was not uncommon.

At that time, a date was a movie, and then a stop at the local ice-cream parlor – all for less than \$2.

My family was very stable and happy and, therefore, I was able to enjoy the neighborhood without any trouble. These years of quiet were about to end surprisingly and tragically.

Korea

The day I graduated from high school was the day the Korean War started. My generation was going to be deprived of the leisure of gradually growing into manhood. It was a jump from the “corner” to a dugout dug into a hill. The sound of cars, trolleys, and talk of friends were replaced by the sound of artillery shells whose aim was to kill me. The man you were carrying to an aid station, crying with pain, was the same man you were laughing with just a short time before. We were afraid to make friends, since sometimes relationships were too short.

Fear was a constant companion. One learned very quickly how to make fear a friend. Fear has tremendous amount of power that, if used, makes the person do things that he never thought he could do. Heroes are people who are afraid, but who have learned how to use the feeling.

It is not natural that a 19-year-old had to face his mortality every day. He should be thinking about baseball and girls instead of whether he will be alive at the end of the day.

The carnage ended. No more artillery. No more cries of wounded men. Companion fear was quiet. Was it simply a bad dream from which I would soon awake? No, it could not have been a dream. Dreams don't wear blood.

Coming Home

It was a good time and a bad time – a time of hope and a time of wandering, a time of joy and a time of emptiness.

I wandered but did not realize it, feeling like the proverbial bird locked in a room, desperately trying to escape and feeling like I kept bouncing off the walls. Happiness was running a good race.

Good people came into my life. For a time, I thought this was the answer to my searching, only to discover that the emptiness was still there.

I do not want to sound bleak. There were plenty of good things in my life. My parents, with whom I lived, were very patient and supportive. I guess that many times they wondered if I would ever grow up. I was going to Fordham University at night (studying pre-law) and working during the day. I had a good friend network. There were plenty of good spokes in my wheel of life. But there was still no rim to hold them together.

I had a priority list of possible professions that I thought I might enjoy, including a top five. It was very fluid, depending on how things were going. Number one today could very possibly be number five tomorrow. One that was always present in this list was being a priest. There were times when I wondered whether bouncing from one thing to another was my fate. The answer was not far off.

Great things happen in surprising ways.

To be surprised goes beyond our bounded world into one that has yet to be experienced. To be surprised brings a courage that we did not know existed. We are challenged to say yes to the uncontrollable.

The street was alive with the sounds of the city and people rushing to get home. Young people gathered in small groups deciding what to do next. The cacophony of a thousand horns in downtown Manhattan was at its peak. I was drawn into the noise.

Something strange happened. The sounds of the street and the voices disappeared. I was in a great silence, a silence that was about to give birth, a silence that was inviting me to be silent. The silence was broken.

I reentered the world of noise. It was different – a great surprise. “I am going to be a Franciscan.” Where did the words come from? The silence had spoken, the years of searching – of wandering – were over.

God had intruded into my life. The different paths I had traveled were all heading toward this moment. He had taken the spokes, refashioned them, and given me the rim I had been looking for – Himself. The path was clear. Now, to walk it.

The Formation Years

To go back 62 years opens the door to remembering more than ever happened or to remember what happened clouded with the haze that comes after more than 60 years. They were happy years. After all this time, I am still trying to understand why they were happy. There were restrictions on when to go to bed, time of recreation, i.e., to talk after hours were determined by the prefect. In any ordinary sense, “happy” would not be the emotion one would expect.

Having said this, I think my happiness came from the conviction that I was heading somewhere. My life had a goal and not just a “bunch” of things to do.

Japan.... living the dream

Being assigned to Japan was another dream come true. I arrived in Japan in September 1966 and began a journey of 28 years – a journey full of joy, growth, and a journey where I would see the hand of God, a journey that, at times, was the Passion but more often Easter Sunday. It was a journey that I looked forward to making. I was full of enthusiasm, sure that within a very short time Japan would be a Christian country. I eventually came to the realization that maybe I was not the second coming of St. Francis Xavier.

The first step on the journey was to learn the language. Learning what St. Francis meant when he referred to Japanese as the ‘lingua diaboli’ {the language of the devil}. It was a grueling experience. With a lot of blood, sweat and tears, I managed to gain a working proficiency in the language. I attribute that to luck and the grace of God. I was ready for the next step.

Once again, I lucked out. I was assigned to a parish with many isolated parishioners. It was my job to visit these folks and to remind them that even though they could not get to Church because of distance, they were still very much part of the community. So, every morning, I would hop in my car and do the circuit. The people were very thankful for my visits. I never realized how much just saying “hello” meant to people.

It was also through this mission that I learned a very important lesson – to wait, to remember that the missionary plants the seeds, then sits back and watches God do some wonderful things. It was also a tough lesson.

This life was not to last very long. I received a call asking me if I would like to be pastor of a middle-sized parish. So off I went – on a new adventure.

It was a middle-sized town, population of 50,000. It was one of the few towns in Japan that was devastated during WW II. This was both good and bad. The good was that it saved a lot of human suffering. The bad was that while the devastated towns rebuilt from

scratch came into the 20th century with new roads and factories with modern technology, this town was stuck in pre-war. The mentality of the people was the same. I do not want to seem harsh. These were all good people.

There were bound to be some difficulties with this crazy young priest. Thank God they were patient. In spite of the clashes, on a personal level, we got along well. I would visit families often and enjoy a cup of tea with them as we spoke of their families, crops and politics. I loved these visits and I think the people enjoyed my company. It was in these visits that I really got to know my people.

Being a pastor in this small parish is where I learned that being a pastor meant being a plumber, carpenter and anything else that had to be done. It also meant getting phone calls at 2 a.m. in order to get a pregnant lady who had just begun labor to the hospital.

It was also a place where I came in touch with human weakness. Arrogance, stubbornness, and not being able to handle loneliness all surfaced, and I really thank God that they did; they call it the doorway to growth.

After five years of it being a rather sleepy country parish, it came to life overnight. The people became very proactive in the life of the parish, they started small prayer communities, and baptisms increased. This is what they probably mean by ownership. Maybe God found some of the seed worthwhile.

I was very happy. This was a bad sign. Anytime I got too happy in an assignment, I was transferred. Some things never change.

For a whole bunch of reasons, I was transferred. This time, I was going to the big city, Tokyo. The Franciscan Chapel Center in 1976 stood in the middle of one of the entertainment districts of Tokyo – bars, gambling halls some stores, a few houses and the Chapel Center. Its main purpose was and still is to service the foreign community living in Tokyo. On any given Sunday, there would be more than one thousand people attending services, quite a jump from the 30 to 40 I was accustomed to in the country.

It had to be one of the busiest churches in the world, or at least among Franciscan churches. The phone would start ringing at 7 a.m., with anything from a young couple inquiring about marriage, to a possible suicide and everything in between. It was just an exciting place.

We had marriages, which at one time was our main ministry. Japan received special permission from Rome to permit non-Christians to be married in the Church, the reason being that so many Japanese young people went to one of the many Catholic universities or parish Sunday schools that Christianity really was their religion of choice. There were many Saturdays that we would have four weddings. The real fun part was being able to speak to them and listen to their hopes and dreams.

There was always someone who wanted to see a priest for one reason or another. It was not strange for us to spend up to eight hours a day in the parlor. This was tiring work but I loved it.

We use to give Cursillo weekends, and high school retreats. I still hear from some of the kids who went on those retreats. Of course, they are no longer kids. Some have kids in high school. Two ministries that I got involved with by accident were the so-called Rice Patrol and adoption outreach.

The Rice Patrol basically was parishioners feeding the poor on the streets of Tokyo. It started with a chance meeting between a parishioner and me. She told me that she and her husband noticed a group of cardboard boxes in the park. Those boxes were “homes” to the “homeless.” The next morning, a friend of mine and myself went to the park. We found the boxes and resolved to do something. The next morning, we arrived armed with 35 Japanese rice cakes. We did this for a couple of weeks.

The word got out and, all of a sudden, we had a lot of people wanting to help. One of our parishioners told about a group of homeless in one of the large railroad stations. The short story is that from just two of us feeding 25 people within a short time it had grown to 100 people feeding 300. Only God could do this. It is still going strong after 40 years.

The adoption outreach is another example of God for some reason choosing me. It all started by a couple (whose name I have forgotten) asking me if I knew of an adoption agency. I referred them to an agency I knew of that had a very good reputation. As time went by, I even forgot that I referred them. One day, they came to church carrying this beautiful baby boy. The word got out that I had some sort of magical wand that made babies appear, which, of course, I did not have. I think that over the years I was involved in about 10 adoptions.

This ministry was a mixed bag, On the one hand, there were the adoptive parents, overjoyed at getting a baby, and on the other hand, was the young couple that, for one reason or the other, had to give the baby up. This always had a note of sadness.

As in all ministries, the most delightful, the most unforgettable aspect was just speaking to and listening to the parishioners. Meeting people where they live is so important. Besides many other things, it goes to enliven Sunday sermons. You can talk to people where they live.

After 18 years of “burning the candle at both ends,” burn out was beginning. My superiors decided that a sabbatical was in order.

Calcutta and Mother Teresa

A dream of 50 years was about to be fulfilled. Another sign that God does not forget, even if we do. I was going to India, to work with lepers with Mother Teresa. I arrived in Calcutta in January 1995. The Brothers of Charity (the male branch of Mother’s order) wasted no time in getting me to work. I was assigned the task of changing bandages and

cleaning feet. This was shock 101. I had no experience in changing bandages and cleaning pus-filled sores was not exactly my cup of tea. Anyway, I threw my shoulders back and started the task. It was very difficult at first. After a few days, I got to know the lepers and changing their dirty bandages was a real joy. A strange thing happened. I actually began to look forward to seeing them. These were people who had absolutely nothing, were ostracized by society and still could smile. A great lesson.

During my time in India, I had the opportunity to have many great conversations with Mother St. Teresa. I will always consider these a great grace. There are not too many people who can claim having one-on-ones with a saint.

To the Holy Land

Unfortunately, for health reasons, I had to cut my stay in India short. This was not an easy decision; I guess God figured I had had enough of my dream. I returned to Japan, awaiting my next assignment. One evening as I was having a cup of coffee with my superior, he very casually said that he received a letter from the Franciscans in the Holy Land asking for a Japanese-speaking friar. My next assignment was determined.

The Provincial was happy because he could help the friars in the Holy Land. I was happy for a whole lot of reasons, not the least of which was to be able to work in the Holy Land, something I thought would never happen.

I had a lot of jobs – editor of the “Holy Land Review,” pastor of a small Filipino community, guiding pilgrims to the Holy Places. Which did I like the most? The answer depended on what I was doing at the time.

Before going to the Holy Land, I did quite a bit of prep work. Foolishly, I thought I had a grasp on what was happening in that confused part of our world. After two years, I came to the conclusion that I did not have the foggiest.

Return to the United States

After nearly 30 years outside the country, I was transferred to the States – specifically, to a chapel that we have in a shopping mall in Colonie, N.Y. As strange as it may sound, I found it a lot more difficult adjusting to this assignment than I did to any of the previous. I am not going into any reasons – just let it be said that, for a period of time, I felt like that sheep who didn’t know where he was.

It certainly was not because of the people, I could not have asked for better. It took about a year, but I finally realized I was no longer in Japan, India or the Holy Land.

The ministry at the Chapel was sacramental – saying Mass, hearing confessions. This was also a shift for me. Most of my time in the missions was spent with non-Christians. It was very busy – five Masses a day, confessions from 10 a.m. to noon and then from 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. and again from 6 to 7 p.m. I loved it there.

We got a pretty good adult education program going. Everything was going along just fine. Then another telephone call came, asking if I would mind going to Philly to assist Fr. Charles Finnegan in starting a retreat house. The location for this retreat house was in the inner city – a lot of drugs, violence and prostitution. It was not the location that people from the suburbs would choose for a retreat. The idea of a retreat house did not grab traction.

The proposed retreat house belonged to St. Francis Inn, a soup kitchen run by the Franciscans. When the retreat house did not get off the ground, the building was given to the Inn as a residence for their lay staff.

I landed in the soup kitchen. My main task was to dish out the mashed potatoes as needed. The Inn feeds about 350 people a day. It is exclusively supported by free will donations.

For someone my age, it was great, mainly because there were always a lot of young people around. These young people, all volunteers helping to serve tables and wash dishes, energized us older folk.

I was all set to spend the rest of my life at the Inn. Once again, God had different ideas. This time it was not a telephone call, but sickness. I do not want to go into the details, but let's say I was in bad shape. The house in which we lived was not safe for someone like myself. The possibility of falling was high. It was decided that I should move to a safer house, i.e., one with an elevator and a nurse. So, off I went to our house in Butler, N.J., with its great house and great community. I am one happy hunter.