

There are moments in life when everything comes full circle. As a senior at Paul VI High School in the fall of 1985, I had Fr. Bill Dougherty for a new elective called Death & Dying. I already knew and respected Dougherty, as we called him, having had him for Morality class as a junior, then working with him as the moderator of Student Government. And, since the Great Class of '86 was the first in the school's history, being among the first to sign up for Death & Dying was another "first."

There were countless Dougherty-isms throughout the course. We got his unique spin on the famous stages of death and dying by Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross. We delved into the power of symbols and ritual, discussed whether we wanted to be cremated or buried, learned how to plan a funeral, and even took a field trip to a funeral home and visited cemeteries. How fun does that sound? We explored beliefs and customs of other cultures; there was even a unit Dougherty thoughtfully entitled, "How to have a wonderful Jewish death." Most importantly, though, we talked about our fear of death, and the inevitability of grief and loss as parts of life... and to face death with faith, hope, and most importantly, love, living each day with a sense of wonder and gratitude. That's what the course was really about. That's what Bill's life was about.

Six years later, in 1991, Bill was the first person I called when I learned that own my mother had died suddenly and unexpectedly. I was a professed Oblate in my first year of teaching at Salesianum, three thousand miles away from my family, who had moved back to California. Many of my high school, college, and Oblate friends made the trip, and Bill preached at the funeral. But before he arrived, thanks to that class at

PVI, I knew the difficult decisions our family would face in those tough days -- and that we had all been prepared, as best as we possibly could, for a moment like this.

Having realized from my experience that Death & Dying was the one high school class you could guarantee every student would need at some point, I vowed to teach Bill's class someday. It took time to pull this off; I had difficulty convincing some of the principals I worked for that *yes*, students would sign up for this class... and *no*, it wasn't too morbid. Well, once I became a principal... problem solved. The course was approved. Bill was delighted and gave me a binder of all his notes from all the variations, from high school elective to parish workshops and everything in between, and I'm proud that his course lives on to this day. I can't say that I do it justice, and it's certainly the easiest "A" at Sallies. But we cover the same topics, we take a field trip to a funeral home, and most importantly, we talk about the reality of loss, our fear of death, and in spite of it all, living each day well, with wonder and gratitude.

And so here we are today. Full circle. Mourning Bill's loss, just as he taught so many of us to do. Walking with one another in our grief, just as he did with so many of us. Lifting Bill up to God, the God he came to know *so personally* as a God of boundless love and infinite compassion. And celebrating his life, a life lived well, a life lived with wonder and gratitude, a life that left a lasting impression on each of us here and so many countless others who encountered him.

We have all met people in our lives who have made a difference. Friends and colleagues, teachers and coaches, relatives and family members, perhaps even an

Oblate. But few people truly change the trajectory of our lives. Our parents, of course, who brought us into this world and formed us, or a spouse who shares in the work of making a home and raising children. But it is a rare person outside immediate family whose influence is truly life-altering. Meeting and being mentored by Bill Dougherty was just that for me -- life-altering -- and I'm not the only person here who feels that way. Every friend I've made since high school, anyone I've ever met as an Oblate, and everything I've managed to accomplish in my career in education -- none of it would have been possible had I not met Bill as a student at Paul VI High School 40 years ago. Through Bill I met and joined the Oblates, and I met his own family, all of whom treated me as one of their own and included me in holiday dinners and vacations when my own family moved back west. It was all part of the Dougherty experience.

Recently, during a workshop on school mission and identity, I was asked to explain Salesianum's "why." I responded that Salesianum exists to provide students with an education that is personal and transformative, helping them to make sense of the world and the mystery of their own lives: to discover who they are, and who God has called them to be, as members of a school community of faith and learning. This was Dougherty's influence. This was what I experienced in high school -- thanks to him and the Oblates and the teachers who had followed them to PVI from Ireton -- and it changed my life forever. Amidst all the craziness and uncertainty of this world, Bill taught us to see life as an extraordinary gift to be cherished and shared. And while he taught those lessons with words -- lots of words, let's face it, Bill certainly did love to talk, even though he *relentlessly* claimed to be an introvert -- he taught most powerfully with his kindness, his compassion, and his care for our souls. At a tender

and vulnerable time in my life when I felt anything but extraordinary, he believed in me. And it forever changed the way I understood the world and my place in it.

In honor of Bill, I chose readings today that are not from the approved list of suggested scripture passages for funerals. A little trick I learned back in *Death & Dying*, to choose readings that reflect the unique life of the person we are remembering. And the reading from the first Book of Kings reminds me so much of Bill. The Prophet Elijah stands at a cave, waiting for the Lord to pass by. And in spite of the terrifying, spectacular power of nature on display, he knows that God is not to be found in the storm, the fire, or the earthquake. He instead waits patiently, listening intently and taking a hard pass on the distractions clamoring for his attention, until he hears a tiny, whispering sound. The prophet knows when God is present. He is in the small moments. The moments that might easily be missed in the overwhelming din and distraction that plague our modern lives.

I am so grateful that a man as accomplished and educated as Bill, who studied at the University of Fribourg in Switzerland and learned from the very theologians who wrote the documents of Vatican II, didn't pursue more glamorous pursuits available to him as a priest such as college president, or noted author and theologian, or bishop, or provincial. Or any of the countless careers he might have had outside religious life as a biochemist, or a translator of Latin and French, or writing encyclopedias, or as an expert in relationships, psychology, and human development. And of course, his endless knowledge of personality types. Did he get a kickback from Myers-Briggs? *"Well obviously I'm an INFP."*

Instead, like the Prophet Elijah, Bill was passionate about teaching, whether it was in the classroom or as a parish priest, or in the communities in which he lived where he talked about food or music or history, or even the latest gossip about this or that person which it must be admitted he could scarcely resist. He loved to bring all that knowledge and intrigue and expertise to the daily encounters so many others might have ignored on the way to what they wrongly perceived as bigger and better opportunities -- drawn by the storms, the fires, and the earthquakes away from the very interactions where God was already present. And that Elijah-mindset made all our lives so much more interesting, so extraordinary. Bill believed in a truth that so few seem to grasp: that success in life isn't about titles or money or status. It's about relationships, connections, and making a difference in the people we see each day.

Ordained a priest in April of 1965, months before the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council, Bill was part of a first wave of Vatican II priests, on fire for the Gospel, the living instruments through which the Holy Spirit breathed new life into the Church. His personal approach and warmth ushered in those winds of change and excitement wherever he went, and throughout his life: first to North Catholic in Philadelphia, where as a teacher he started the Quest program for independent study (and also published the most infamous yearbook in school history); then to Bishop Ireton in Alexandria, where he and his classmate Charlie Norman founded the bold and innovative Education by Appointment; then to Paul VI, where he was part of starting a brand new school with wonder and gratitude baked into the school's very DNA; and then as a parish priest and spiritual director at St. John Neumann in

Reston, where he helped found the Live Jesus program, modeled the importance of remaining active, connected, and intellectually stimulated in retirement, and so many other contributions too numerous to count.

“We must do ordinary things extraordinarily well,” St. Francis de Sales writes. The difference we make might seem small in the eyes of the world, but like that tiny, whispering sound, it is precisely there that we meet God, provided our distracted minds and hardened hearts are open enough to find it. Bill is a shining example of how one life can change another, with ripples of influence and wisdom radiating to countless lives beyond his reach. To anyone who knew him, Bill lived life *extraordinarily well*, with great love for every soul he encountered and an uncanny ability to make life's deepest mysteries somehow relatable.

Bill had a coffin in his classroom at PVI, a simple, rectangular pine casket he built himself; I don't see it here today, and don't know what happened to it, but in its day it was quite a conversation starter, more coffee table than coffin, with artifacts, Nativity scenes, and of course, books... books written by theological giants like Karl Rahner and Bernard Lonergan and Hans Kung and Teilhard de Chardin, serious men who we thankfully never had to read in high school, but who would get the occasional casual reference in class as if Bill knew them personally -- a notion that certainly seemed plausible at the time, as there seemed know end to his expertise on almost any topic.

A decade later, in my graduate school theology courses, I realized that Bill had cleverly, almost subliminally introduced complex theological frameworks from the

men who wrote those books into our adolescent minds, in a way only Bill could do, and only to the degree that was comprehensible and relevant to our lives at the time. Like seeds of wisdom planted in our souls, these ideas would bloom later in our lives, even now bearing fruit in ways we can scarcely comprehend.

I had never seriously considered being a priest, or a teacher, until I met Bill, but he showed us all that life could be filled with endless adventures, meaningful opportunities, and profound friendships. If I had to sum up in one passage what his life was about, it would be today's Gospel. "Love one another as I have loved you." Bill understood that the secret to any community, any parish, any school, any classroom, was to remember what he had learned in his family growing up, and what had been fostered in the Oblates, and what was a blueprint for church renewal in Fribourg... that the church is not a building, but rather that we are the body of Christ, that God loves each of us unconditionally, and that we are called in turn to love one another as God has loved us. "We all have a vocation," St. Francis de Sales wrote. "We must believe that God has called us to a special mission that no one else can accomplish." That we are called, each in our own way, in the midst of our daily lives, to build a civilization of love. We've all heard that we are created in the image and likeness of God, but Bill had a singular talent, and an incredible gift, for helping us understand that idea not just as an abstract theological construct, but in far more personal, transformative, intimate terms. To understand how unique and known we are among all the other souls in God's kingdom. Bill had an amazing life, I am so deeply grateful for his compassion and kindness that helped me discover my own vocation as an Oblate, a priest, an educator, and most importantly, as a human being.

And so, we've come full circle, Bill. What more can we say, except to do what you taught us to do in these very moments: to live today in a spirit of wonder for the gift we have received in knowing you. And to give thanks to God for the love and care you gave so freely to each of us until we meet again. For as St. Francis de Sales said, "Friendships begun in this world will be taken up again, never to be broken off."

Rest in peace, Bill. And thank you.