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Celebrating Everyday Spirituality



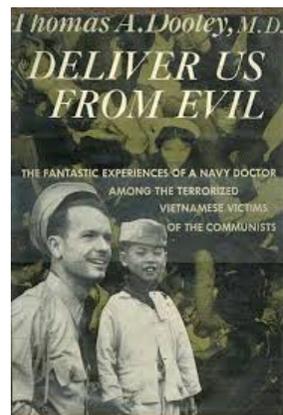
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The Grace of Inspiration

by MELANNIE SVOBODA SND on MAY 19, 2014.

In 1959 I was a freshman at Regina High School in South Euclid, Ohio. One day in the library I came across a book entitled *Deliver Us from Evil* by Thomas A. Dooley. The author was a young doctor from St. Louis who had served in southeast Asia as a navy doctor during the mid and late 50's. From the very first chapter I was "smitten" by the man. To be completely honest, I was already smitten by his photo on the cover! As I read the book, I learned that not only was he handsome, he was also intelligent, funny, and extremely compassionate. When he left the navy he went back to that troubled part of the world to provide medical treatment for refugees and villagers—especially children.



Dooley inspired me—so much so that, a few months later, when I learned he was going to speak at Cleveland Heights High School one evening, I begged my sister to take me to see him. She did. After he spoke I hung around backstage for a little while, saying to my sister, "I *have to* shake the hand of Tom Dooley." And I did. Sadly, Dooley died of cancer only two years later, but the organization he founded continues to provide medical care in Laos, Nepal, Nicaragua, and Thailand. To this day I give partial credit to Dr. Tom Dooley for my decision to become a nun. I too wanted to devote my life to helping people—in my case, through teaching. Dooley was my inspiration.

What exactly is inspiration? To me it goes beyond admiration. Inspiration *moves us* to do something. When I am inspired by someone or something, I am moved to act. I recently read an article on inspiration by David Shribman in the *Notre Dame*

About Sister Melannie Svoboda, SND

Sister of Notre Dame,
teacher, student, author,
speaker, listener, friend,
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About Sunflower Seeds

Each Monday I'll post a short reflection, a simple musing on some aspect of spirituality—the everyday kind of spirituality that



includes things like walking in the park, slicing an onion for the casserole, caring for a child, studying for an exam, reading a line from scripture, laughing at a joke, or mourning a significant loss.

Along the way I welcome your questions, comments and insights too. After all, we're all in this life—this spiritual life—together!

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Magazine (Autumn 2013). The article is entitled “The Beckoning.” That phrase captures something of the essence of inspiration. We are beckoned by an unseen force to do something. Schribman says this about inspiration: “Inspiration’s power is in what it says below the breath, its whispers urging us to try, pushing us to carry forward, bidding us to dream.”

Schribman says inspiration is “as elusive as it is indispensable.” It is a mighty force yet it has a gentle presence. We can be inspired by many things: “by moments, by stories, by uplifting talk and unforgettable example.” Yet we cannot force inspiration. Writes Schribman: “Don’t look for it. Let it find you.” He adds, “But (inspiration) will not find you if you are not open to its lure.” To me, inspiration sounds a lot like Grace, doesn’t it?

So, today might be a good day to reflect on the role of inspiration in your own personal life. When have you been inspired by someone or something? (Notice, I’m assuming you have!) What were you inspired to do? Did you experience the inspiration as both mighty and gentle? Has anyone ever told you that you inspired them?

And here are a few more questions about inspiration I’d be interested in getting some feedback on:

* Is being inspired more likely to happen to the young rather than to the middle-aged or elderly? Why or why not?

* Whom in the gospels did Jesus inspire? What did he inspire them to do?

* What role does inspiration play in the passing down of our Christian/Catholic faith?

I began by talking about Dr. Tom Dooley. Here are a few more facts about him, some of which I learned long after high school:

* He was accused of being a spy for the CIA. Researchers say although he did provide information to the CIA about the villages he worked in, he was never a CIA agent or spy. He was there essentially to provide medical care.

* President Kennedy cited Tom Dooley’s example of compassion when he launched the Peace Corps.

* Dooley was forced to resign from the Navy because he was gay.

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* Dooley attended the University of Notre Dame and was good friends with Father Hesburgh, a former president of the university. A letter he wrote to Hesburgh is displayed in Notre Dame's famous grotto, a place on campus dear to Dooley. The letter was written a month before Dooley died. It's beautiful! You can access it by googling "Tom Dooley's Letter to Fr. Hesburgh." Just click on the Notre Dame archives and it appears.

* There is a movement for the canonization of Tom Dooley.

PS: When you read this I will be facilitating a retreat at the Mercy Retreat Center in St. Louis, Missouri. (Coincidentally, St. Louis is where Dooley was born and where he is buried.) I would appreciate your prayers for all the retreatants—and for me!



The state of Tom Dooley in the grotto at the University of Notre Dame.

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Louise May 19, 2014 at 4:49 am



Sister, what a beautiful reflection on Tom Dooley. I never heard of him before today, and just read his letter in the archives with a tear in my eye. What a remarkable man! No wonder he gave you such inspiration

REPLY

Kathleen Magiera May 19, 2014 at 5:36 am



Sr. Melannie,

I have seen the grotto with the Tom Dooley statue. It is truly an inspiring place built for an inspiring man.

How sad that he was forced to leave the Navy because he was gay.

Kathleen

REPLY

Chris Keil May 19, 2014 at 10:09 am



God be with you on your retreat. The Mercy center is lovely! Kevin goes there every year for the composers forum, a program for many church composers. They like it there!
Your questions sound much like the teacher you are! I'll get back to you on some of the answers!!!!!!

REPLY

Marjorie May 19, 2014 at 11:16 am



Ah, another Tom Dooley fan! He was my inspiration when I was in junior high, along with a few others. I, too, decided I was called to be a nun from his inspiration, but God shut that door for me. The compassion he demonstrated has guided my life. I am certain that the inspiration I felt from him and that of others I knew or only read about who were loving and kind influenced me to living my life as best I can in harmony with our God. How wonderful that you met him! You're in my thoughts and prayers during your retreat.

REPLY

Stephanie May 19, 2014 at 3:22 pm



As a librarian, I always perk up when I hear stories of how students are inspired by books they encounter through the library. Thanks for inspiring me in my work! Blessings, Stephanie

REPLY

Josita May 19, 2014 at 6:23 pm



Melanie,

I love your thoughts on inspiration . I think anyone at any age can be inspired. When I was 71, two years ago, my spiritual director inspired me to go to a spiritual directors' training program. I was worried because of my age, but I just completed the program and it has changed my life!
I also was always inspired by Tom Dooley, too. As a young sister I read his book and others written about him. Thanks for the recall on this wonderful man.
Will remember you and your retreatants in prayer. Josita

REPLY

Anne May 19, 2014 at 11:22 pm



Sister, just wanted to let you know that my mother had his book at home. I remember as a teenager many moons ago reading his book. Didn't the "enemy" push sticks into his ears that pierced his eardrums? He described the screaming and I will never forget the man, for his humility and courage. His letter about the grotto was beautiful especially from a man suffering from the horrid cancer in his back!

REPLY

Karen May 20, 2014 at 10:34 am



Welcome to St. Louis! I live just a few miles from the Mercy Retreat center and know how peaceful a place it is. I remember knowing about Dr. Dooley while growing up here. Although I have read his books before, your comments about him make me want to revisit them now. Blessings on you and your retreatants.

REPLY

Janet Ashe May 20, 2014 at 5:50 pm



What inspires me? It is the clear and consistent message of the Sisters of Notre Dame. When I came to Notre Dame College a year and a half ago I knew nothing about the sisters except they had founded the college. Since then I have attended the Charism, one of the best experiences in my life, as well as becoming part of the NDC community. The simplicity of your message and yet the complex

nature of your mission has been so inspirational to me and as helped me immensely. Sister Melanie I live your poetry books also. Provident care as played such a huge role in my life. I can clearly see it now as it takes me to Clearwater Central Catholic High School. I look forward to your blogs to keep me centered and inspired.

REPLY

Sunnie Poplar May 21, 2014 at 10:17 pm



I too read his book, met him and I think I still have the autographed copy somewhere. I sure hope so now that you say he he being considered for canonization.

His inspiration took over 50 years to come to fruition in my life when I finally got to help our parish mission group in Honduras for the last several years.

I have also been much inspired by your articles in Living Faith for years and just missed meeting you at a mutual friend's funeral a few years ago. Love following you through Sunflower Seeds. My favorite flower, by the way.

Wish I had known you were doing a retreat in St. Louis as I have a daughter who lives there. Bless you for all your inspiration.

REPLY

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