

UNWITTING WITNESS

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I currently work at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops as Coordinator of Education and Outreach for the anti-human trafficking program. I have been in this ministry since 2002. Although the direction has not always been clear, the journey has been blessed.

I taught English at the College of Notre Dame of Maryland for more than thirty years. While teaching at the college level, I also taught college writing courses to men in Maryland prisons, a ministry which began through Margaret Ellen Traxler, SSND in the 1970s when I was a Director of Novices at the interprovincial novitiate in Chicago. Margaret Ellen asked me to teach creative writing to women at Cook Co. jail once a week for six weeks. For the next 23 years I would be in and out of prisons once a week as a teacher of writing and I would meet over the years to come women religious from many communities who would tell me that Margaret Ellen launched them on their journeys with the poor.

I was educated by School Sisters of Notre Dame in Cumberland, Maryland where I grew up, and again at the College of Notre Dame where I enrolled after high school. I entered the community not because I knew I wanted to be a teacher but only because I was attracted by the spirituality of the teachers I had. There was in me even then a deep desire to be face-to-face with God. I gave very little thought to what I would *do* in SSND. Nevertheless, I have lived and served through the medium of ministry. I have been graced and grounded by it. And in *doing*, I have found that, given competence and professionalism, my real ministry is presence. Ministry is as effective as my presence in God is steady. The *doing* is substantially qualified by my spirituality, which, in turn, is a direct derivative of my SSND life. All things work together.

I do not consciously reflect on charism nor do I consciously do things as a School Sister of Notre Dame. I live my life as prayerfully and responsibly as I can in the moment. It is only in retrospect that I realize that my participation in a certain situation or dynamic has in fact been a concrete demonstration of my desire to bring about unity, or of my impulse to engender harmony, or of my deep belief that the transformation of the world depends on the transformation of people. Education has been about empowering people to reach their fullest potential. Charism has dictated my standards as a teacher. I learned very early as a SSND, without knowing I learned it, to distinguish between perfection and excellence and to opt for excellence. I believe that I am who I am not because I have educated myself to our charism and consciously cultivated it. Rather, I am who I am because unwittingly I have been grounded in the charism; unselfconsciously I have been graced into it. Perhaps one is called because one is a fit, and not made a fit because one is called.

My current ministry, although vastly different in content, is simply an extension of my life as an SSND educator. Educating myself and others about human trafficking calls forth the same skills it took to learn and teach the novels of William Faulkner, or to empower a student to craft a poem. My current work is significant to SSND because, again, it reflects our charism. Human trafficking is not a feminist issue, although approximately 80% of the victims are female. It is first and foremost a human rights issue. We, along with a large range of other women religious across the world, address the issue not because it fits our traditional mission of service to women and children but because it fits our long history of addressing the suppression of peoples. It is consonant with our concerns for the poor. It is reflective of our larger pro-life stance that cautions us about the rights of others to live and to live freely and in dignity, without war or capital punishment or enslavement of any kind.

As I was preparing to leave college teaching and looking for a new ministry, I knew three things were important to me: I wanted a ministry in which I would use my mind; I wanted a ministry in which I would work with others, and I wanted a ministry through which I could help the poor. My current position grants me all three. I am steadily challenged by the increasing flow of material about human trafficking, the need to learn the issues and to understand the analyses. I use my mind. I work with a team of people here at USCCB, and engage steadily with government officials, outside non-government agencies, colleagues in the field, university and hospital staffs, and sometimes victims themselves. I work with people. Through education, always an educator, in whatever I have done, I focus people on the issues and on the victims, enhancing awareness and generating action. My works benefits the poor. And it is a natural outgrowth of my previous history both in the classroom and in the prisons.

Approximately six months after they had been extricated from a brothel, I sat with four Mexican teenagers who had been deceived by men who persuaded each of them to come to the U.S. for a better life, promising marriage, love and a good job where they would earn money to send home to their families. Instead they were forced into brothel work, guarded by ruthless women, sisters of the traffickers, who beat them, threatened them, and coerced them to serve more than fifteen clients a day. When I met them, they were receiving services from an agency where we had placed them, following a raid and temporary detention by the Immigration and Naturalization Service. They were 15 and 16 years old. I noticed many things about them, but mostly I noticed that their development seemed to have been arrested at the age they were trafficked. They had been in the brothel for approximately three years. Forced into the adult arena of sex and violence where they had to comply and perform like adults, they seemed suddenly to have regressed to childhood. Slowly, with patient and professional help and a great deal of personal pain, they have emerged to become young women who are grounded in hope and possibility. Their recovery did proceed slowly, through suffering, and their roots are sturdier, their flowering lovelier. They will probably not be victimized again.

In my last ten years or so as a college teacher I came to understand that teaching is essentially about learning. I understood that each person in the rooms where I taught knew something I did not know, and that, while it was my responsibility to be competent in the subject matter at hand, it was also my responsibility to be present to the possibilities and imaginations my students presented. I continue to look at life and ministry that way. I am experientially persuaded of the transforming value of education in its broadest sense. We are all learners.