

Conveners Corner

By Rob O'Keefe, Convener of Illuman of Minnesota

Greetings to you all. On June 26, 2021, Illuman of Minnesota held our first in-person event in over a year. As we planned the event in May and June, I noticed my soul yearning for the retreat to arrive. Zoom calls are a valid substitute in light of larger issues. But they will never compare to the connection men feel when they are physically together in nature. I didn't realize just how much I had missed that connection until it was so close to happening again.

At the end of the retreat, we took some time to acknowledge the transition our chapter was making. Our original convener, Kevin Anderson, and our current convener, T. Michael Rock, were there to help pass the torch. I am humbled to walk in their footsteps. Both Kevin and T. are dynamic presences in our organization. Each are members of the clergy, full of ideas and easy in front of a group.

I, however, am not ordained (though I found a church on the Internet that would be happy to ordain me, after I send them my credit card info...?). My path to Illuman and male spirituality comes by a different route. Richard Rohr has said that there are two routes to wisdom: through Great Love and through Great Suffering.

Growing up in a large Irish American family, I was raised to believe that there were only two spiritual states a person like me could exist in: you were either a Catholic, or a lapsed Catholic. Since I couldn't square the church's exclusivity with my own heart, I fell into the latter category. I thought that was it: My spiritual path had come to an end.

Through my twenties and thirties, I built my ladder, earning degrees and awards and moving up into higher positions in different organizations. I appeared to be doing really well. My internal state was quite another matter. In rare moments of honesty with friends, I would laughingly say that I was "functionally depressed." But it wasn't a joke—it was a cry for help.

Shortly before my thirty-seventh birthday, that world came crashing down. My marriage disintegrated and I had to confront the long-simmering truth that I was drinking at levels that were dangerous to me and others. I joined a 12-Step group, where they told me what I needed was a spiritual solution.

Well, I didn't like the sound of that. I certainly didn't believe that it would work for me. But I was desperate, so I gave it a chance.

And it worked. God led me to the 12 Steps...and the 12 Steps led me back to God. I stayed sober, developed a spiritual practice, and recovered what I had "lost," including a new marriage. But the peace and serenity that the 12-Step program had promised continued to elude me.

The spiritual path I was trying to walk led me to Richard Rohr, and that led me to the MROP in Sandstone, Minnesota in 2017. By that point, the early progress I had made with the 12 Steps had eroded considerably, along with the second marriage. I would love to tell you that the Rites of Passage fixed everything. They did not...but they made me aware of where I was at, and gave me a group of men who were willing to walk alongside me wherever that path led.

The MROP was the beginning of a new phase of recovery for me, one that has been called "emotional sobriety." I'm forty-eight now—and I've got so much growing up to do! But Illuman and the men in it have been an essential container to help me to achieve a measure of the peace and serenity I wouldn't have believed were available to me.

Like I said, I'm not clergy. I'm not ordained. I don't know what I can really bring to Illuman, except smart-aleck jokes and this: I whole-heartedly believe in our mission, "We are men transforming men through a power greater than our own."

I heard this from a guy named Bob B. Not sure where he got it. He said:

A farmer doesn't grow. A farmer tills the soil, plants a seed, provides water, and creates an environment in which growth can take place—and God grows.

A doctor doesn't heal. A doctor cleans wounds, set bones, provides a plan of care, and creates an environment in which healing can take place—and God heals.

And we don't change. But we can create an environment in which change can take place—and God changes us.

I have changed...but always by force, along the path of great suffering. I'd like to try to change through the path of great love now! And I love the men I've met through Illuman. As a convener, I am dedicated to creating an environment of change with them and for them in any way I can.

Because when we do...God always shows up. 😊