

A Priest And His Dog Collar



It was a strange but exhilarating feeling - wearing a dog collar for the first time. It was exactly 49 years ago - October of 1964. I had graduated high school and had entered St. Patrick's Seminary to begin eight years of study, prayer, meditation and spiritual direction in order to be ordained as a Roman Catholic priest. Within a month of entering, my 43 classmates and I were each issued a long, black soutane that covered us from neck to ankle - and a gleaming white Roman Collar attached to a "bib" that had shoulder straps to hold it in place. I imagine that it felt somewhat like the initiation of a pre-pubertal girl as she wrestles her way into her first training bra: it isn't really necessary but it feels good and promises much better things ahead. For the girls "better things ahead" means developing *real* breasts and being the object of admiration for boys who, heretofore, only saw her as a giggling annoyance. For us seminarians, "better things ahead" meant ordination and being loosed on Africa to bring the light of Christ to "those who dwelt in darkness."

So each morning I strapped on my clerical collar and finally, after eight years, I was indeed ordained, unleashed and sent to Kenya. I very quickly realized that Africa has its own light that often outshone a Christianity which preached a message of love while practicing a gospel of division. I soon gave up *that* brand of Christianity in favor of becoming what Carl Jung called a “Gnostic Intermediary” - someone well enough versed in two or more traditions so as to be able to cross-fertilize them. I arrived at a satisfying mixture of the mysticism of my great-grandmother, the druidism of my grandfather, the theology of Thomas Aquinas and the pantheism of Africa. It had a very satisfying flavor.

Two years after ordination, I donated my clerical collar to a colleague - Paddy Gallagher - who had been summoned to Rome to study Canon Law. I have never worn a dog collar in the 39 years since then - until today; because today, as I set out on my trek to Meditation Rock, I knew that I needed to be wearing a dog collar. So I borrowed one and fastened it about my neck. I noticed that there were some red hairs clinging to it. Now, I am not a redhead, nor have I ever been, but the friend from whom I borrowed it was a redhead, with whom I had fallen in love 12 years before. During those years, I have spent as much time with her as I have with any three humans combined. We hiked together regularly in the forested mountains of Tír na nÓg, ten miles from the little town of Healdsburg in Sonoma county, California. Our two favorite treks were to Pena Creek and Meditation Rock, where I am now perched as I write this account. In the evenings, before sunset, we would climb onto Meditation Rock which overlooks Pena Creek 500 feet below it; and both of us would sit silently until the night had washed the pinks and reds and russets and oranges out of the sky and replaced them with turquoise. Then I'd raise my arms above my head and sing the Pater Noster in Gaelic. Still maintaining our silence, we'd clamber off the rock and head for home.

Age, unfortunately, caught up with her much faster than it did with me, and for the last year, she has been unable to accompany me on these daily pilgrimages. In the last few weeks, her health deteriorated very quickly, and last Thursday at 1:10 PM she breathed her last, silently and serenely passing through the VEIL.

Today, I decided to wear her collar in my journey to Meditation Rock. I'm wearing it now and it is a perfect fit. I'd never have guessed that our necks were the same size.

Today's meditation is *for* her and *about* her, this love of my life whom I have lost. I wear her collar as a symbol of our eternal bond. Her name is Kayla and she was my canine companion since June 2, 2001 when I fell in love with her and adopted her from the Marin Humane Society. No other dog collar ever felt quite this good.

Namasté,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sean". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the left.

Tír na nÓg
September 2013