

**Summertime Escapes, Good day to you sweet autumn  
The Pope's visit, a Dylan lyric, the  
Gardener and an elongated reflection**

"Then everyone commenced to do what they've been doin' before he moved their heads"

Like a lot of people, I paid attention to the media's account of the recent visit to America by Pope Francis. The depictions of the Pope across the media spectrum varied little. The Pope's warmth, humility, embrace of the poor and commitment to social justice were both highlighted and acclaimed.

Mostly left unsaid or unstated was that compared to the last guy, he was a breath of fresh air. This represented a welcoming change, still something about the depictions left me unsettled. I couldn't figure out why until Dylan's lyric from a semi-obscure song recorded forty years ago started playing in my head.

That one line "Then everyone commenced to do what they've been doin' before he moved their heads" essentially captures the essence of why real change either on a macro level or micro level is so difficult an accomplishment.

There is still no real universal commitment to pacifism, non-violence and social justice despite the example and teachings of those who would be canonized (here I refer to Martin Luther King and Gandhi) if they shared the Pope's faith.

Personal transformation, redemption if you will, is incredibly hard to achieve. It takes a lot of hard work and a daily commitment.

We welcomed summer with the planting of Moses Mohammed's sunflower garden. That started my daily ritual of looking out the side window in my office to check on their progress. Early on I noticed someone who I did not recognize watering the earth. "Who's that?" I asked David. "That's Gerald. He's new, part of the Ready, Willing and Able crew, he's gonna take over for Al, remember Al was promoted, Gerald is responsible for all the grounds around the buildings."

David casually mentioned that it had taken a little bit of effort to maneuver Gerald's rather lengthy CORI by Jerry. Paying homage to his favorite sport he said, "I 'Deked' him to the left and then fired it right through the 'five hole.'"

I made it a point to engage Gerald as I walked around the grounds. In one of our earlier conversations Gerald confessed, "Jim, I really don't know what I'm doing, I've never done this before." I stopped myself from responding philosophically and simply said, "Well I think you're doing great, keep working at it."

Not long after I noticed Gerald making decisions about placement of plants. Occasionally he would come by and share his recommendations with me.

What a pleasure it was to watch the gardens and plantings come alive this summer. 5 or 6 weeks ago I sent photos of the mature sunflowers around the agency. One response, "Moses is smiling" touched me.

Dylan's complete lyric brings me to the third part of this piece.

He moved across the mirrored room. "Set 'em up for everyone" he said. "Then everyone commenced to do what they've been doin' before he moved their heads"

One summer during the late 60's I hung around the Hotel Lounge as the bonds I formed earlier on the playground and street corner moved inside.

The "Hotel" was located where Rt. 15 (Mineral Spring Avenue) empties into Rt. 44 (Smith Street) in North Providence. An old building, narrow and deep, the bar on the first floor, rooms on the second and third. Think the "Dug Out" on Kendall Street, the "Wolf's Den" in Palmer, the place in Gardner that the Mayor chained himself to (after we emptied it) and the Windsor Hotel in Hardwick.

Better known as "Skinny's" after the proprietor, who was not, but he was a major league scumbag, the long mirrored narrow bar greeted you at the entrance, pool room and hangout space directly behind it.

Naturally all this young and new energy congregated in the back room. Society was at the cusp of change. While the bar, generally reserved for the regulars, many of whom lived upstairs, smelled of beer skunk and cigarettes, the back room was thick with the smell of weed. This was also the time when heroin seeped into our largely working class community, splintering it into uncountable pieces and occasional tragedies. It wasn't unusual to find someone shooting up in the bathroom.

Entering Skinny's and walking through the bar to the bathroom, especially in the afternoon or early evening, usually caused the regulars to look up and watch your image in the mirror as you sauntered by. Often times they would be nodding off from booze and simply open an eyelid.

One particularly memorable afternoon, a rheumy eyed regular, face festooned with gin blossoms looked up at the scene passing by, put his head down on the bar and never woke up.

As the EMT's carted his body out the front door, I heard Skinny's unmistakable croaky rasp, "\_\_\_\_\_" him, now I'll never get the money that bum owes me."

I went to the back room where my buddies were playing pool and screeched, "That's us. That's goin' to be us in 30 years. What are we doing here?"

They looked at me, saw a mysterious third eye and then proceed to do what they be doin', before they looked up at me.

I proceeded to walk out the front door and never went back.

About three weeks ago, as autumn ushered itself in I ran into Gerald in the SMOC Housing space. "Jim, I'm moving out of SMOC. Me and my girlfriend are getting our own place. Thank you for everything you've done for me." Pause. "Don't worry, I'm still going to work here."

It's been gratifying these last few months to watch Gerald lift his head up at the sight and encouragement of Deb, David, Al and others, and start a new path, literally standing up, pushing the stool aside,

walking out the door of his previous life and entering the door of his new life.

And that's the point, the goal, the essence of what this agency believes in every single day with every single person we work with.

At this time, I would like all the award winners and their supervisors or sponsors to stand up. Please join me in a round of applause. You guys make a different life possible.

- First part of lyric inspired by an old Sandy Denny song, Carnival, 1973.
- The Gardener's name has been changed.
- Dylan's lyric is from the song "Lily, Rosemary and the Jack of Hearts" Blood on the Tracks, 1975.
- The "five hole" in hockey parlance means right between the legs.