

Vivian Donnelley's Remarks

Dedication

St. Francis Retreat Center & Father Francis Kline Memorial Chapel

Sunday, August 25, 2013

My husband, Strachan Donnelley, met Father Francis in the 90's when Strachan was the president of the Hastings Center and Francis came to his office to talk about Mepkin and South Carolina environmental concerns.

I remember Strachan coming home and trying to describe the quietly dynamic man, priest, abbot, scholar and thinker, gifted musician he had just met. The recognition clearly was mutual and keen because a bond of love, of shared interests and insights quickly grew between these two men.

When Francis came to New York he often came to see us. One memorable evening we sat in our garden over a dinner I cooked accompanied by one of Strachan's good red wines. Francis reminisced about his childhood, his years at Juilliard, his years in Rome; he and Strachan celebrated their shared love of music, and Francis in particular spoke of his love of sacred organ music. They talked philosophy. They spoke of the power of family and living up to personal expectations. I sat listening to these two good men as the light faded. I remember Francis throwing his head back in a hearty laugh.

Francis officiated at our daughter Naomi's wedding in 2004 at Strachan's boyhood home north of Chicago, Windblown Hill. In his homily, Francis spoke movingly of the need for, and reverence for, place, for deep roots for the body and the soul.

I took our 5th and youngest daughter, Tegan, to college, in August of 2006, because Strachan, shaken and sad, needed to be here to say good-by to Francis.

Two years later it was Strachan's turn to leave us. I think of these two "men of the world"-- in the best possible sense--gone in the midst of important work and much more to do. The impish gleam in the eye they shared shuttered for all time. I strained to understand. But I don't think either of them ever complained; there was certainly no "Oh God, why me?"

Strachan wanted very much for this retreat center to be built. He looked forward to his Center For Humans and Nature, and the Gaylord and Donnelley Foundation, our family foundation, coming here periodically to be renewed and refreshed. He wanted continued collaboration with people here in terms of ideas and projects for the Low Country. He treasured his ongoing relationship with Father Stan and all of you at Mepkin.

In 2007 there was another Donnelley wedding, and a new Abbot. Father Stan presided over Ceara's wedding to Nate at Ashepoo, our beloved home south of Charleston.

Then it became my turn to treasure this relationship. Stan stays in touch with me and our family and I am grateful for this. I can and do hug Stan. Francis had an aloneness about him that precluded embrace; I had to be and was satisfied by the warmth in his eyes. I think Francis would be pleased to know, and Strachan, too, (who knew of course about the musical gift but didn't get to see it play out) that our 15 year old grandson now studies cello at Juilliard.

Francis was a beautiful man, and I am happy to be part of this beautiful tribute to him.