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Norbertine Art Professor Talks of Hope, the Healing Power of Nature. . . and Baking!

Jim Neilson O.Praem.

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Norbertine Art Professor Talks of Hope, the Healing Power of Nature and ... Baking!

Dear Parents,

I think about these masks we’re all wearing on campus which, along with other careful protocols undertaken in a spirit of sacrifice, seem to have enabled us to reach this point in the semester. We’re still in-person. We’re still here! And I think of these masks as being these little relics, sources of wonder and awe for a future generation. One day your student is going to pull one out of a drawer and say, “Look what I wore once.” And someone will respond, “You had to wear this? How did this work?”

I know that the sacrifices our students are making in their generation are very real for them, so I want to be careful to avoid pious platitudes. But let’s not underestimate the resourcefulness and the resiliency of our young people, plus their natural generosity, which has not only surprised me, it has saved me. I couldn’t even program a VCR back in the ’80s. And so our online experiences back in the spring, our hybrid classes for those quarantined, have all been a big learning curve for me. The students will spontaneously give instruction to me as I teach, and I am so profoundly grateful. And I tell them, it’s an absolute gift.

What can I give them in return? I hope I can give them encouragement to persevere and hope. We need never give up hope for our return to normalcy. It’s going to come. I think that, because we’ve been deprived of normal, unmasked, interaction for so long, our joy will be unbridled when it does. It will be absolutely glorious!

Meanwhile, I think we’re doing our best at St. Norbert College. I know the faculty are being exceptionally creative and spirited in how they’re rethinking their classes to engage the imaginations of one and all. And St. Norbert has been beautiful this fall. Let’s not suppose that this natural palette hasn’t given us all some joy, some pleasure, some hope for the future. Campus is like a beautiful park, thanks to Norbertines like Father Anselm Keefe, Class of 1916. He began, 100 years ago, planting trees in advance of our arrival so we would enjoy these particular colors when we most needed them.

Our sense of agency is probably more profound now than ever, as is our sense of how we can influence the future. We’re cultivating each other’s hearts in advance of a future of love and joy and infinite possibility.

Soon you’ll be seeing your students again as they return home. We’re inevitably going to be deprived of some opportunities, but that means others open up. To the extent that we can, I hope we can visit the outdoors to allow nature to educate us, to inspire us, to stimulate us, to animate our hearts a bit more. I think the earth heals. It soothes us with fragrance, with color, with texture. In fact, I see this as our constant pursuit: to discern beauty in the library, in the scriptorium and in nature.

Through Thanksgiving and into our winter break, we have an opportunity – particularly this year – to think more intentionally about affection and regard for family. It’s certainly an opportunity to exercise mindfulness about resting well, and maintaining health and fitness. It wouldn’t be a bad thing to cultivate the art of letter-writing again in these times of relative seclusion. I don’t think anyone’s anticipating getting any letters, and to get one – what a joy, what a surprise!

And I don’t think you could ever go wrong with baking more. It’s meditative. You have to wait. There’s the ritual



About the Rev. Jim Neilson ’88

The Rev. Jim Neilson ’88, aka Father Seamus, has served on the art faculty of St. Norbert College since 1993. This fall he takes up a new position as special assistant to the president for mission integration.

Grab Your Party Hats

Starting this Advent season, the **Norbertine order** will embark upon **14 months of observations** to mark its 900th jubilee. The festivities will conclude on Christmas Eve 2021, the anniversary of the day the first Norbertines professed solemn vows in Premontre, France, in 1121.

Also in This Issue

This article first appeared in the November 2020 issue of Parents of St. Norbert College. Other features in this edition included:

Norbertine Art Professor Talks of Hope, The Healing Power of Nature and ... Baking!

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of preparation, and then the vicarious joy of others delighting in what you prepared for them. One of the assignments for my Intro to Studio class, as a matter of fact, is to bake cookies that look like modern masterpieces. Why not eat a work of art? The kitchen is calling, friends!

Happy Thanksgiving,

The Rev. Jim Neilson '88

Assistant Professor of Art
Special Assistant to the President for Mission Integration

Nov. 17, 2020

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