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Although sharing much common ground when it comes to philosophy and ministry, often Mary and Bob find themselves approaching ministerial concerns from different angles... *He said - She said* is a venue to share differing perspectives and provide food for thought.

### Six Degrees of Separation

#### *Bob's Perspective:*

The theory of Six Degrees of Separation says that a connection can be shown between any two people in the world within a matter of six degrees (or steps). For example, one might find that I have a connection to none other than Frú Brunhildé Bilchmoinknersen of Árborg Iceland through the following process:

- Step 1: My first cousin has a friend in California named Sam.
  - Step 2: Sam's brother-in-law has an uncle in Massachusetts named Larry.
  - Step 3: Larry's mother has a twin sister named Doris.
  - Step 4: Doris' grandfather came from England. His name is Throckmorton.
  - Step 5: Throckmorton's wife is from Árborg Iceland. Her name is Olivia.
  - Step 6: Olivia' best friend (who incidentally was their Maid of Honor) is Brunhildé.
- Therefore, within 6 degrees, I have a connection with Frú Brunhildé Bilchmoinknersen of Árborg Iceland.

And so goes the theory, as far-fetched as it may seem. However, I've had a number of incidents in my life (not quite always in six degrees) but interesting enough to make me wonder.

The latest incident happened a few weeks ago. An event took place at the Parish in which I serve (someone became ill and was taken out by ambulance). Within an hour after this took place, I received a text message from my girlfriend Bonnie, who lives on the other side of town. The text was asking me about what had just happened. I texted back and asked her how she knew. Bonnie responded that the aunt of one of her close friends goes to our parish. Apparently, this aunt told the friend and happened to mention the name of the church. The friend in turn told Bonnie in a roundabout conversation. Bonnie, recognizing that her friend was talking about my parish, contacted me.

Another incident: Last spring I attended a fundraiser (dinner, silent auction, side boards, etc.) for a Catholic health facility that took care of my Mom in her last years. At one point in the evening, I went to pay for an item that I won in the Silent Auction. As I handed over my credit card, the person handling the transaction recognized my name and said, "You're the music director at my niece's church. As a matter of fact, she's in one of the music ensembles there." He told me his niece's name (which I recognized instantly), and of whom I spoke well. He went on to talk about his niece and mentioned how music ministry had such a positive impact in her life. Because of his niece's experience, he (and later his wife) decided to take an active role in the life of their parish as well. I'm not exactly sure what may have happened in the course of our ministry that had such a significant effect in the life of the niece, but it obviously reached out beyond to influence this gentleman and his wife in a significant way. In turn, who knows what hopefully positive impact they will have in their parish?



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You just never know who may be watching or listening – and what they may be saying - and to whom they may be saying it. This causes me to take a moment to reflect upon how potentially positive or (if done poorly) how potentially negative could be the result of my influence. It's fortuitous that my usual practice is to behave in a respectable manner (or at least give it the old college try) so as not to cause scandal to my ministry or to those around me. This is a lesson one should always keep in mind, whether in the public sector or in the private sector. A word or a gesture can be life-giving or it can be deadly – and both can be very far reaching.

I have more stories, but I'm sure that many who read this can site similar events in their lives as well.

Case in point: we're all connected in this world. What we do matters, what we say matters, how we treat each other matters, and how we conduct our life matter! A simple incident can have a far reaching impact within these Six Degrees of Separation.

*Mary's Perspective:*

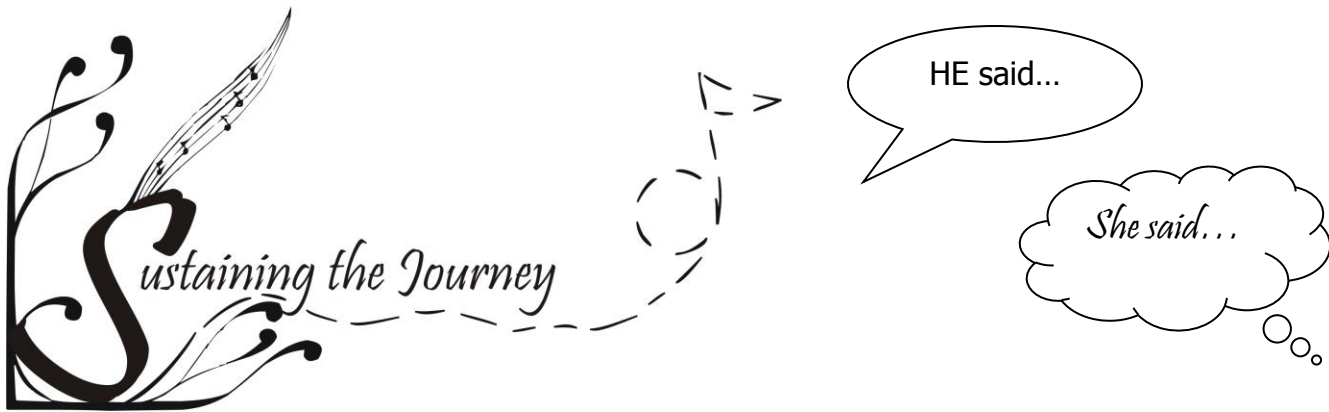
Though perhaps not as engaging as the story of Frú Brunhildé Bilchmoinknensen of Árborg Iceland, I, too, have been reflecting on my experiences of Six Degrees of Separation. First, like Bonnie finding out about the person taken by ambulance from the Mass that Bob was playing, Bob and I once had a similar exchange.

Allow me to set the stage... A few years back, my parish experienced rapid changes in leadership – as in, four pastors in four years. During the "in-between" times, I was responsible for making sure the spiritual needs of the people were met. I arranged for priest coverage for all of our Masses, funerals, reconciliation times, and even Anointing of the Sick. I'm fortunate to have been in this diocese for over 35 years, so I had a few priest friends, favors to call in, and kind area clergy who helped out our parish. But in some ways, that period of time felt like a revolving door of priests, so when I gave the announcements at the beginning of each Mass, I would introduce the presider.

At one particular Saturday evening liturgy, I was, perhaps, tired. Distracted? Certainly had been putting in extra effort. Maybe one could describe what happened as a synapse that was slow to fire. Whatever the reason, when I stood up to do the announcements, I had a rather long moment of being unable to call to mind the presider's name. Mind you, he was a dear friend, standing there smiling at me, and we had celebrated many masses together. Just that day, that time, that set of circumstances.... Well, suffice to say I was not having the best day. The moment would have gone by basically unnoticed if the presider hadn't walked in and said to me, in front of the entire assembly, "don't worry, Sweetheart, we all have the occasional brain fart."

Although I continued to play the mass with flaming cheeks, the rest of the day was uneventful – that is, until Bob called me the minute I got in my car to drive home. In the way that only Bob can, he made me painfully aware that he had heard of my unfortunate lapse in memory. When I stopped sputtering, I asked how he found out. Turns out, his cousin attended the Mass, thought the whole exchange was "cute", called Bob when she got home, and RATTED ME OUT. That was less than Six Degrees. But certainly, I learned a lesson.

Working in a church where I am very visible – the piano is right by the sanctuary, in the center of the church, and I communicate the announcements at every liturgy – has made me very conscious of being polite and professional as



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much as possible. In addition, I have some leadership roles across the diocese and with a national professional organization, and my stature is distinctive and recognizable. People notice! (As Bob said, how we conduct our lives matters.) It has also made me value my privacy. As I've mentioned before, I don't "do" social media, and I keep a pretty high wall between my professional and personal lives. We would all do well to realize that the world is more connected than one might think.

Have you ever noticed there are people you meet who can almost immediately make a connection to someone else in your realm? For example, this is the type of person who might relate to the college you attended, or have a cousin/friend/sibling that goes to the same gym as you, or drinks coffee at your favorite watering hole. Even Facebook and LinkedIn immediately look for connections or common ground or other people you might know. There are myriads of personality tests that have different labels for this characteristic, but, no matter what it's called, it is definitely a common trait. Our staff once went through the *Living Your Strengths* process, and "connectedness" is a defined strength. Folks with this strength relate well to others because they find common ground quickly.

One more observation, this one specific to music ministry (but applicable in other settings)... I have worked with many choirs over the years. As the leader, I make it a point to know a little bit about each person. We've addressed this before – in order to be a good minister, you need to know those with whom you pray. So I was surprised to find out recently that there are members of my choir who do not even know the names of other members. I was lamenting to a fellow choir director, who confirmed that the same is true of members of his choir. He described that folks come to choir practice, sit in the same spot each week, participate in the practice, and then go home again. As much as I would like this ministry to feel like "family", others don't have that need or desire. They join the choir because they like to be part of the music process and sing at mass.

While I understand that we all do what we do (be it music ministry, or feeding the hungry, or working at a specific job) for our own reasons, and you can't ever make someone else have your priorities and motivations, I would propose that we can be more effective – no matter the task at hand – if we work together. Finding the connections, or the common ground, builds trust. And relationships built on trust have a solid foundation. The work of one person alone pales in comparison to what a united group can accomplish. Whether it's a professional organization, or a choir, or simply a friendship, the sum of the parts can be greater than any individual effort.

So what does this all mean? If it's true we are all connected by Six (or fewer) Degrees of Separation, then it can't be that hard to find common ground. What is it you're working at that could be stronger, more fruitful, or better? Think about who is in the circle working for the same goal, and find the connections. If it's a co-worker or choir member whose name you don't know, introduce yourself!

And then, maybe write down their name in case you have an unfortunately-timed brain fart.