

Pat and Randy Robertson, relaxing at their lakeside home in Winter Park, work together on an annual symposium that melds art and faith, but isn't overtly religious.



ART, IDEAS — AND — Illumination

GladdeningLight, Randy Robertson's visionary venture, explores the intriguing intersection of spirituality and creativity.

BY DANA S. EAGLES

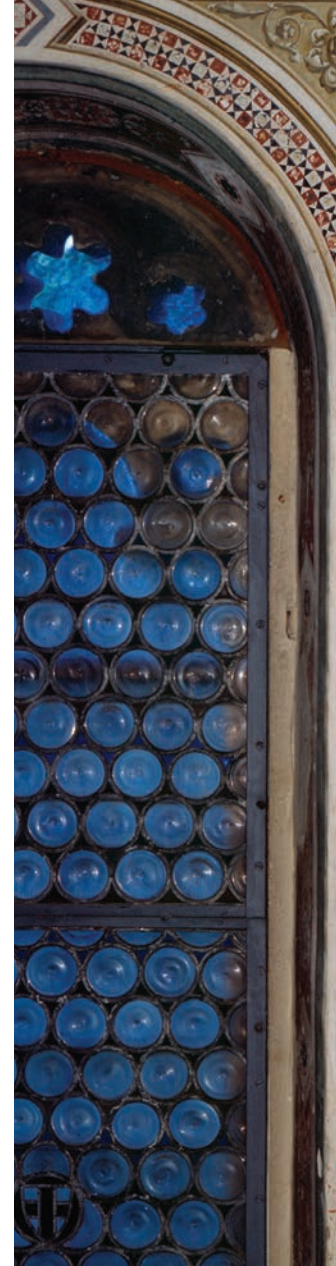
PHOTOGRAPHS BY RAFAEL TONGOL

Epiphanies can occur in some pretty strange places. For Randall B. Robertson, the realization that he could use exquisite Giotto frescoes to help others find their spiritual path came in the early 1990s while he was driving along one of Central Florida's least picturesque stretches of highway: State Road 436 in Casselberry.

Robertson, 61, then a sports-marketing entrepreneur, had been reading *The Glorious Impossible*, a book that combined a narrative by Madeleine L'Engle with images of those frescoes, which depicted the life of Christ.

His grandmother had given him a copy of L'Engle's classic young-adult novel *A Wrinkle in Time* when he was 13, and it had a big impact, says Robertson, whose friends call him Randy.

"There's a climactic moment in that book that is about divine love and the power of infinite love," he recalls in his elegant Winter Park home overlooking Lake Virginia. For a teenager struggling with the strictures of a fundamentalist upbringing in Jackson, Mississippi, the book had been "a real powerful alternative to show that there was another path. It was all about love."



Robertson had seen the frescoes when he visited Padua, Italy, as a college student studying Renaissance art. He had been transfixed by them, lingering in the Scrovegni Chapel for hours.

Convinced that *The Glorious Impossible* deserved a bigger audience, he impulsively pulled into a Wendy's parking lot and used a pay phone to call L'Engle, writer-in-residence at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City. To his surprise, she answered — and listened.

Their collaboration resulted in a multimedia presentation that brought together images of Giotto's frescoes with L'Engle's live reading of her narrative and lots of music — choral works, opera and even a David Crosby song. Sound effects included whales wailing when Christ was seen on the cross.

Robertson and L'Engle, who died in 2007, presented *The Glorious Impossible* across North America for years, mainly in sacred spaces. The work became a foundation of GladdeningLight, the nonprofit Robertson now runs with the goal, as he puts it, “of introducing a spiritual element

into an aesthetic experience.” The organization's annual symposium, featuring poet David Whyte, will be held Jan. 29-31 at All Saints Episcopal Church in Winter Park.

Barbara Brown Taylor, an author, religion professor and Episcopal priest who spoke at the 2015 symposium, says Robertson's events aren't quite like anything else. “I've been keynoting events for 30 years, and GladdeningLight is among a handful — say, five — that have fed my soul while I've been trying to help other people,” she says.

The 2015 event drew more than 300 people from 23 states and Canada, according to Robertson. Taylor, author of *Learning to Walk in the Dark* and many other books about faith, appeared with sculptor and painter Tobi Kahn and Irish singers Owen and Moley Ó Súilleabháin. She says GladdeningLight events reflect Robertson's own spiritual quest.

“We write the books we need to read,” Taylor says. “Randy creates the kind of events he needs to attend.”

NO BLACK AND WHITE

Robertson isn't a clergyman or a theologian, but he projects a pastoral calm and a keen intellect in discussing his own religious past and his mission of offering fellow seekers a different kind of spiritual experience during a time of declining church attendance.

In Robertson's world, an understanding of art history, theology and philosophy come together with a practical ability, honed in his sports-marketing business, for putting on a show.

Yet, despite his zeal for creating new spiritual avenues, he takes part in traditional forms of worship and service. He's an active member of All Saints Episcopal Church (which is hosting the symposium), and for 10 years he has worked once a week with inmates at Tomoka State Prison in Daytona Beach, leading discussions about character and philosophy.

Robertson was raised in a loving home, he recalls, but his family attended the Church of

When he visited the Scrovegni Chapel in Italy and saw the Giotto frescoes depicting the life of Christ, a transfixed Robertson was inspired to incorporate the frescoes into a multimedia presentation in collaboration with author Madeleine L'Engle, whose books he had loved since childhood.



Christ, with fundamentalist teachings steeped in guilt and shame. “We were the Church of *Chraast*,” he jokes, feigning a Deep South drawl. Dancing was a no-no. So was swimming with the opposite sex. “It was all about what you can’t do.”

Sin is a legitimate component of spiritual awareness, but being imprisoned by it is counter-productive, explains Robertson. Over the years, he has moved away from what he calls “atonement theology” and toward “progressive Christianity.”

“We in the West have a real tendency to think in dual terms: black, white; we’re the good guys, you’re the bad guys; right, wrong; my way or the highway,” Robertson says.

He describes progressive Christianity as “moving beyond oppositional thinking toward unitive consciousness, relinquishing judgment to God. That doesn’t mean anything goes — but it leaves room for questions to express doubts.”

While a student at Rhodes College in Memphis, Robertson’s faith took a turn. As a 21-year-old undergraduate pursuing a liberal arts degree,

he went to Italy and visited the Scrovegni Chapel, home of the Giotto frescoes. The experience changed his worldview. “It was the seed for this art component as being central, at least for me, to spirituality.”

It was also at Rhodes that Robertson met his wife, Pat Schenk, a Winter Park native who was daughter of Jay Schenk, a civic leader and founder of Central Florida’s largest beer distributorship. (The elder Schenk died in 2004, and the distributorship was sold in 2011.)

While a student, Robertson discovered an innate but previously untapped talent for organizing and promoting events, from concerts to an alternative-film series. In addition, he was a member of the college’s golf team.

Those experiences led Robertson to a job with the sports marketing firm IMG, where he set up events and dealt with hospitality and media for golfing legend Arnold Palmer. He went on to build his own successful golf event-marketing firm, R.B. Robertson and Co., from which he’s

now retired.

In 2008, with *The Glorious Impossible* experience behind him, Robertson combined video, photography, special effects, computer graphics, music and nature sounds in another multimedia production, *Phos Hilaron*, billed as a “Christmas pageant for thinking adults.”

Based on *The First Christmas* by theologians Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *Phos Hilaron* played to audiences in Georgia and North Carolina. It was around then that Robertson began wondering whether his future might be in the ministry.

“There’s kind of an urge that dwells in your belly,” he says. “While this is all great stuff, and you’re making a lot of money, there’s some other calling out there.”

So, with the last of the Robertsons’ three children having gone to college, he headed to New York City in January 2009 for seminary studies, living in what he calls “a monastic environment.”

After a year, however, he decided the life of



Robertson might have found himself behind the altar in a place like Knowles Memorial Chapel. But after a brief stint in seminary, he decided that being an ordained minister would be too confining.

an ordained minister was too confining, and he abandoned his studies. "Having that collar and that power platform just really wasn't that important to me," he says.

LET THERE BE LIGHT

Instead of entering the clergy, Robertson started GladdeningLight, with the mission of bringing together writers, thinkers, visual artists and musicians who "honor the divine spark" and inspire others in a collaborative setting.

The first event, in 2011, was called Lovefest, and although it attracted a good crowd, the name now makes Robertson wince. Later programs have been called "symposiums" to emphasize an exchange of ideas.

(The name GladdeningLight is a translation from Greek of *Phos Hilaron*, and refers to the introduction of light into darkness.)

Like Robertson himself, GladdeningLight events can't be neatly classified. It's perhaps easier to describe what they're *not*. They're not worship services or revivals; they have no overt religious message and few references to Scripture. Though rooted in Christianity, they're open to people of all faiths.

"Even though we're in a church facility, you're not going to hear anybody preach, and you're not going to be subject to any conversion attempt," Robertson says. "These symposiums are for serious thinkers. They're for people who are reading



Valentine

Concert in Central Park

An afternoon of art, music & romance in downtown Winter Park

Sunday, February 7

1:30 p.m.

Sunday in the Park with John Sinclair
featuring members of the Bach Festival Choir & Orchestra
presented by Art on the Green & The Bach Festival Society of Winter Park

4:00 p.m.

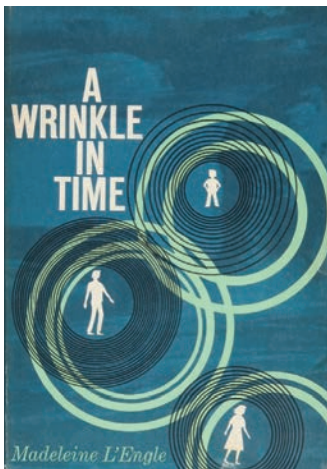
Michael Andrew & Swingerhead

Details at ExperienceParkAvenue.com or call 407-644-8281






#LoveParkAve



A Wrinkle in Time, a spiritually themed 1963 fantasy novel aimed at children, still entertains and challenges readers of all ages today. Author Madeleine L'Engle, above, was a Robertson collaborator and a major influence on the GladdeningLight ethos.



and listening and are intellectually curious.”

Robertson says they’re also not a substitute for church. “What we’re offering is not sacramental in the truest sense. I still believe in the tenets of the sacraments, where you’re called to participate in communion, and some other things in church that are just irreplaceable.”

The cross-currents of spirituality and the arts, along with the opportunity to reflect alone and with others, give GladdeningLight events their unique character, participants say.

“The atmosphere was one of almost going to camp in an elegant place with time to really think about important things,” says Elaine Woods Johnson, a retired educator who lives in Dothan, Alabama and attended her first GladdeningLight event — a retreat at an Oregon resort — in 2012.

“It’s enlightening to see that people are trying to make sense of things, more than what the church has dictated over the years,” says Johnson, a Presbyterian elder who’s a member of the Alabama State Council on the Arts. “The key is getting out of self and appreciating the ‘otherness.’ What resonates with me is that through the arts, you break open. The arts, for me, are a way into something much bigger.”

Taylor, the 2015 keynote speaker, says GladdeningLight’s liberal use of art and music reduces the dominance of talk found in more traditional pursuits of spirituality. “The great relief is that we live in a culture that’s word-saturated and agenda-saturated. There’s a freedom in these events that I love.”

Taylor, who serves on Robertson’s advisory council, says there’s one other thing that makes GladdeningLight distinctive: The attention to detail that Pat brings to hospitality for the events.

Robertson, who refers to his spouse as his “spiritual right arm,” couldn’t agree more. “Pat makes me look good,” he says.

SHARED EXPERIENCES

Robertson says he tries to make GladdeningLight’s events self-sustaining through registration

fees, but notes that “we lose money on almost everything we do. It’s coming out of my pocket. It’s been a labor of love. I was really lucky to do well in my secular life, and now I’m shoveling it back out the door.”

He has been branching out, organizing “pilgrimages” that combine tours of significant art collections with time for reflection and discussion. So far, GladdeningLight has offered trips to New York City and Washington, D.C., led by Ena Heller, director of the Cornell Fine Arts Museum at Rollins College and founding director of the Museum of Biblical Art in New York.

Robertson serves as chairman of the Cornell’s Board of Visitors, an advisory group that, under his guidance, has developed a new strategic plan for raising the museum’s visibility. “He was able to get everybody excited about a vision of where we could really go,” Heller says. “Randy helped us dream.”

He also hopes to collaborate with Central Florida arts organizations. Though no date has been announced, during the 2016-17 season he plans to partner with the Bach Festival Society of Winter Park and Enzian Theater on a performance of a musical work by Richard Einhorn, *Voices of Light*, which will accompany a screening of Carl Theodor Dreyer’s celebrated 1928 silent film *The Passion of Joan of Arc*. The Bach Festival Choir and Orchestra, along with soloists, will be conducted by the society’s artistic director, John Sinclair.

As GladdeningLight grows, Robertson says, it will continue to be rooted in shared experiences.

“I think all of us in the ’60s saw what Woodstock was about and enjoyed this sort of Family of Man concept,” he says. “Even in this day of social media, I’m still a firm believer in face-to-face interaction, and that’s what GladdeningLight is about. It’s bringing people together in a physical space — because there’s energy there.”



Poet David Whyte will appear at the annual GladdeningLight Symposium of the Spiritual Arts.

WORLD-RENOWNED POET, IRISH SINGERS HEADLINE SYMPOSIUM

Oprah Winfrey’s favorite poet headlines the annual GladdeningLight Symposium of the Spiritual Arts, slated for Jan. 29-31 at All Saints Episcopal Church, 338 E. Lyman Ave., Winter Park.

World-renowned poet David Whyte, author of seven books of poetry and four books of prose, is associate fellow at Oxford University’s Said Business School.

And he’s an unusual sort of poet in that he combines the esoteric worlds of poetry, theology and business leadership. The theme of this year’s symposium is “Solace: The Art of Asking the Beautiful Question.”

Joining Whyte — and returning to the GladdeningLight Symposium for the second consecutive year — are Owen and Moley Ó Súilleabháin, brothers from Western Ireland who sing ancient canticles and traditional Gaelic folk hymns.

The brothers, who have worked with actor Russell Crowe and director Steven Spielberg on *War Horse*, delighted attendees last year with their humor and musicality.

GladdeningLight is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to explore the relationship of art and spirituality through conferences, exhibits, performances, retreats and pilgrimages.

The cost is \$225 for the entire weekend, although some lectures are priced separately.

The Ó Súilleabháin brothers will give a free performance Saturday at 8 p.m. in Tiedtke Concert Hall on the Rollins College campus.

For a complete schedule of events and registration details, call 407-647-3963 or visit gladdeninglight.org.