

EVERYDAY SACRED, EVERYWHERE BEAUTY

Readings from an Old Monk's Journal



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Part One

SAVED BY LOVE

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A Global Heart

My favorite story of Saint Benedict happened at the end of his life. According to his biographer, Gregory the Great, Benedict was standing before his window in the dead of night, wrapped in prayer. Suddenly a flood of light shone down from above, clearing away every trace of darkness. Gregory writes that according to Benedict's own description, the whole world gathered up before his eyes in what appeared to be a single ray of light.

I thought of this story while I was viewing a preview of *Globalized Soul*. There's no doubt that the filmmakers have the same vision as Benedict and know it to be the essential insight of all religion: darkness will be destroyed only when, in the light of love, we see every man and woman, every nation and culture, as one.

We are introduced in the film to many ordinary, deeply spiritual individuals, people who are devoting their lives to bringing about this oneness. We find them in dangerous and divided places, working nonviolently to make possible the dawn of a global village.

The video took three years to film and involved trips to five continents, one hundred hours of footage, and thirty-five interviews of visionary and spiritual activists representing the world's religions. It showcases sacred music and rituals from around the globe.

I have to say that I really enjoyed the sacred music, especially the Turkish Whirling Dervishes, and wished the film had given music equal time to the speakers. I think we still put too much trust in the word, rather than in music and art, to change the human heart. I say this even though Erie Benedictine Sister Joan Chittister is one of the speakers in the film, as well as His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Rabbi Michael Lerner, and Roshi Joan Halifax, among other inspirational figures.

I also like to think that this prayer, which I wrote a few years ago, is in the spirit of Benedict's vision and the *Globalized Soul*. I offer it for your consideration:

I bow to the one who signs the cross.
 I bow to the one who sits with the Buddha.
 I bow to the one who wails at the wall.
 I bow to the OM flowing in the Ganges.
 I bow to the one facing Mecca,
 whose forehead touches holy ground.
 I bow to dervishes whirling in mystical wind.
 I bow
 to the north
 to the south
 to the east
 to the west
 I bow to the God within each heart.
 I bow to epiphany, to God's face revealed.
 I bow. I bow. I bow.



A Good Laugh

A friend in California sent a photo to show us that Lucy, her newborn granddaughter, is the youngest member of Monasteries of the Heart and perfectly at home with an online community. All of us got a kick out of it.

Sometimes people worry about whether they are doing Monasteries of the Heart “right.” We get occasional notes asking if there is a step-by-step program to follow to become an authentic monastic. Unfortunately, there is no such check-off list in the Rule of Saint Benedict. The Benedictine path to holiness is a way of life, just learning to live an ordinary life extraordinarily well.

And life provides ample hints at the holy. The picture of Lucy appearing on my computer screen, for example, reminded me of the importance of laughter.

At one of our community meetings the facilitator had us pair off with another sister, sit face to face, and begin laughing aloud. And continue laughing aloud. And continue. We did it for three minutes. She recommended trying it for ten minutes.

Sometimes when I’m by myself in the house I start laughing aloud—hearty and hilarious. I love it. I feel so great when I’m through—refreshed, relaxed, and content.

I also read in Oprah’s magazine that one secret to a long life is to smile at yourself in the mirror when you get up in the morning. I don’t know whether the practice teaches you to take yourself lightly—that your morning face, and by extension you, are a hoot, or if the smile changes your attitude toward the new day. Whatever, I am trying it.

Thank you, Lucy, for providing a good laugh. It is an essential spiritual practice of a monastery of the heart.



Morning Coffee

I was part of a group of sisters that met monthly to discuss spiritual stuff. I remember one meeting when we were having a deep discussion on the meaning of life and someone asked, “Why do you get out of bed in the morning?” We started around the circle, and it was the second or third person that said, “What gets me out of bed in the morning is the thought of my first cup of coffee.” We laughed. Then another sister said, “Me, too, especially if I remembered to set the timer the night before and can smell it already brewing.” Then a third. A fourth. Until three-fourths of the sisters gathered admitted they got out of bed in the morning for the taste of fresh coffee.

That discussion prompted a poem in me:

No light yet. Old Monk pours
steaming hot coffee in a mug and sits.
Same ritual, morning after morning—the years
a blur.

“If upon awakening
your first thought is of God,
you are a monk,” Wayne Teasdale wrote.
What if your first thought is of coffee?
What does that make Old Monk?
“A lover of pleasure”
would do as an epitaph.

Then I read this reflection by Brother David Steindl-Rast and everything fell into place:

What is it you tend to tackle with spontaneous mindfulness,
so that without an effort your whole heart is into it? Maybe

it's that first cup of coffee in the morning, the way it warms you and wakes you up, or taking your dog for a walk, or giving a little child a piggyback ride. Your heart is in it—and so you find meaning in it—not a meaning you could spell out in words, but a meaning in which you can rest. These are moments of intense prayerfulness, though we may never have thought of them as prayer. They show us the close connection between praying and playing. These moments when our heart finds ever so briefly rest in God are samples that give us a taste of what prayer is meant to be. If we could maintain this inner attitude, our whole life would become prayer.



On Retreat

I'm on retreat this week. As in the past fifty-two years, I'm participating in the annual retreat of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie. I always look forward to the week for a chance to rest, receive new insights, reflect, and renew my spirit.

And yet, when I look back over these five decades, there are few retreat leaders whose names I even remember, let alone recall what they said. So, are retreats all they're cracked up to be?

I was a novice, only eighteen years old, when I attended a retreat led by Father Kieran, a young Benedictine monk from Latrobe, Pennsylvania. Father Kieran drew on mystical writings and wove poetry, music, and art into his conferences. He made my head swim with a God of beauty and mystery, even though I had absolutely no idea what he was talking about. His God was way beyond the imagination, let alone the experiences, of this teenager who still equated holiness with devotions, rules, and rituals. But he sparked a flame inside me that never died—I wanted to know the God that he knew.

James Finley, noted author and retreat director, came bearing incense and prayer gongs and Eastern mystique. What I remember about Finley is that he freed me to pray.

I identified with Finley because, like myself, he was a prayer-method addict. In search of the “perfect” prayer, both of us had tried yoga, chanting, centering prayer, meditation. Finally, Finley was told by his spiritual director to trust the prayer method that God had given him—writing. Finley told us that he prayed best by writing. Well, so did I. And it was good.

Next, I remember the Native American Sister José Hobday, a mountain of a woman in stature, style, and spirit. In solidarity with the world’s poor, she owned only one dress. She had us throw coins in the air during a conference to practice detachment. She invited us to dance with her in a thunderstorm under the stars. As part of her retreat, each of us gave to the poor an item we didn’t need, one we loved, and something that was deeply precious to us. She was wild and audacious in her interpretations of living the gospel. How I envied and lusted to be that free in the arms of God.

And finally, there was Edwina Gateley. I sobbed through most of her retreat. Gateley, a poet and international speaker, started homes for prostitutes and street people in Chicago. Like Jesus, she told us story upon story of broken lives and the tender mercy of God. She gave vivid accounts of going into the toughest bars of Chicago, listening to street women, and accepting them without judgment. If you’re lucky, at least once in your life you will meet the compassionate heart of God. Gateley was that for me.

So, are retreats worth it? I think so. The four I vividly remember focused my spiritual path. One gave me an unquenchable thirst for the divine. The second centered me in my particular path to God. The third made me roll the dice for freedom of spirit as the only virtue worth dying for. And the last enforced the spiritual truth that all this prayer, all this retreat stuff is straw and chaff unless we grow into the compassionate heart of God.