

Kathleen Norris

Somehow, the abbreviated service, with two or three short psalms and a brief reading, would let me set aside my busy ideas and my words and sink into contemplation. A moment of rest, it became like a door opening into afternoon and evening, and I could welcome it all.

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DEGENERATES

Not long ago I accompanied a Trappist abbot as he unlocked a door to the cloister and led me down a long corridor into a stone-walled room, the chapter house of the monastery, where some twenty monks were waiting for me to give a reading. Poetry does lead a person into some strange places. This wonderfully silent, hidden-away place was not as alien to me as it might have been, however, as I'd been living on the grounds of a Benedictine monastery for most of the last three years. Trappists are more silent than the Benedictines, far less likely to have work that draws them into the world outside the monastery. But the cumulative effect of the Liturgy of the Hours—at a bare minimum, morning, noon, and evening prayer, as well as the Eucharist—on one's psyche, the sense it gives a person of being immersed in the language of scripture, is much the same in any monastery. What has surprised me, in my time among monastic people, is how much their liturgy feeds my poetry; and also how much correspondence I've found between monastic practice and the discipline of writing.

Before I read a few poems of mine that had been inspired by the psalms (the mainstay of all monastic liturgy,) I discussed some

of those connections. I told the monks that I had come to see both writing and monasticism as vocations that require periods of apprenticeship and formation. Prodigies are common in mathematics, but extremely rare in literature, and, I added, "As far as I know, there are no prodigies in monastic life." The monks nodded, obviously amused. (The formal process of entering a monastery takes at least five years, and usually longer, and even after monks have made final vows, they often defer to the older members of the community as more "fully formed" in monastic life.)

Related to this, I said, was recognizing the dynamic nature of both disciplines; they are not so much subjects to be mastered as ways of life that require continual conversion. For example, no matter how much I've written or published, I always return to the blank page; and even more important, from a monastic point of view, I return to the blankness within, the fears, laziness and cowardice that, without fail, will mess up whatever I'm currently writing and, in turn, require me to revise it. The spiritual dimension of this process is humility, not a quality often associated with writers, but lurking there, in our nagging sense of the need to revise, to weed out the lies you've told yourself and get real. As I put it to the monks, when you realize that anything good you write comes *despite* your weaknesses, writing becomes a profoundly humbling activity. At this point, one of the monks spoke up. "I find that there's a redemptive quality," he said, "just in sitting in front of that blank piece of paper."

This comment reflects an important aspect of monastic life, which has been described as "attentive waiting." I think it's also a fair description of the writing process. Once, when I was asked, "What is the main thing a poet does?" I was inspired to answer, "We wait." A spark is struck; an event inscribed with a message—*this is important, pay attention*—and a poet scatters a few words like

seeds in a notebook. Months or even years later, those words bear fruit. The process requires both discipline and commitment, and its gifts come from both preparedness and grace, or what writers have traditionally called inspiration. As William Stafford wrote, with his usual simplicity, in a poem entitled "For People with Problems About How to Believe": "a quality of attention has been given to you: / when you turn your head the whole world / leans forward. It waits there thirsting / after its names, and you speak it all out / as it comes to you . . ."

Anyone who listens to the world, anyone who seeks the sacred in the ordinary events of life, has "problems about how to believe." Paradoxically, it helps that both prayer and poetry begin deep within a person, beyond the reach of language. The fourth-century desert monk St. Anthony said that perfect prayer is one you don't understand. Poets are used to discovering, years after a poem is written, what it's really about. And it's in the respect for the mystery and power of words that I find the most profound connections between the practice of writing and monastic life.

"Listen" is the first word of St. Benedict's Rule for monasteries, and listening for the eruptions of grace into one's life—often from unlikely sources—is a "quality of attention" that both monastic living and the practice of writing tend to cultivate. I'm trained to listen when words and images begin to converge. When I wake up at 3 A.M., suddenly convinced that I had better look into an old notebook, or get to work on a poem I'd abandoned years before, I do not turn over and go back to sleep. I obey, which is an active form of listening (the two words are etymologically related).

In fact, I tell the monks, when I first encountered the ancient desert story about obedience—a monastic disciple is ordered by his *abba* to water a dead stick—I laughed out loud. I know that *abba's* voice from those three A.M. encounters; I know the sinking, hope-

less feeling that nothing could possibly come out of this writing I feel compelled to do. I also know that good things often come when I persevere. But it took me a long time to recognize that my discipline as a writer, some of it at least, could translate into the monastic realm.

The monastic practice of *lectio divina*—which literally means holy reading—seemed hopelessly esoteric to me for a long time. When I'd read descriptions of it, I'd figure that my mind was too restless, too impatient, too flighty to do it well. But then the monk who was my oblate director said, "What do you mean? You're *doing* it!" He explained that the poems I was writing in response to the scripture I'd encounter at the Divine Office with the monks, or in my private reading, were a form of *lectio*. He termed this writing active *lectio*, at least more active than the usual form of meditating on scripture. I had thought that because I was writing, because I was *doing* something, it couldn't be *lectio*. But writing was not what I'd set out to do; words came as if organically, often simply from hearing scripture read aloud. I was learning the truth of what the Orthodox monk Kallistos Ware has said about the monastic environment; that in itself it can be a guide, offering a kind of spiritual formation. Not all my poems are *lectio*—to believe that would be too easy, a form of self-indulgence—but the practice of *lectio* does strike me as similar to the practice of writing poetry, in that it is not an intellectual procedure so much as an existential one. Grounded in a meditative reading of scriptures, it soon becomes much more; a way of reading the world and one's place in it. To quote a fourth-century monk, it is a way of reading that "works the earth of the heart."

I should try telling my friends who have a hard time comprehending why I like to spend so much time going to church with Benedictines that I do so for the same reasons that I write: to let

words work the earth of my heart. To sing, to read poetry aloud, and to have the poetry and the wild stories of scripture read to me. To respond with others, in blessed silence. That is a far more accurate description of morning or evening prayer in a monastery than what most people conjure up when they hear the word "church." Monks have always recognized reading as a bodily experience, primarily oral. The ancients spoke of masticating the words of scripture in order to fully digest them. Monastic "church" reflects a whole-body religion, still in touch with its orality, its music. In the midst of today's revolution in "instant communication," I find it a blessing that monks still respect the slow way that words work on the human psyche. They take the time to sing, chant, and read the psalms aloud, leaving plenty of room for silence, showing a respect for words that is remarkable in this culture, which goes for the fast talk of the hard sell, the deceptive masks of jargon, the chatter of television "personalities." Being with monks is more like imbibing language—often powerfully poetic language—at full strength. One night, when we ended a vespers reading with a passage from Job; "My lyre is turned to mourning, and my pipe to the voice of those who weep," I was awestruck, not only by the beauty of the words but also by the way those words gave a new dimension to watching the nightly news later that night, leading me to reflect on the communal role of the poet.

Poets and monks do have a communal role in American culture, which alternately ignores, romanticizes, and despises them. In our relentlessly utilitarian society, structuring a life around writing is as crazy as structuring a life around prayer, yet that is what writers and monks *do*. Deep down, people seem glad to know that monks are praying, that poets are writing poems. This is what others want and expect of us, because if we do our job right, we will express things that others may feel, or know, but can't or won't say.

At least this is what writers are told over and over again by their readers, and I suspect it's behind the boom in visits to monastic retreat houses. Maybe it is the useless silence of contemplation, that certain "quality of attention" that distinguishes both the poem and the prayer.

I regard monks and poets as the best degenerates in America. Both have a finely developed sense of the sacred potential in all things; both value image and symbol over utilitarian purpose or the bottom line; they recognize the transformative power hiding in the simplest things, and it leads them to commit absurd acts: the poem! the prayer! what nonsense! In a culture that excels at creating artificial, tightly controlled environments (shopping malls, amusement parks, chain motels), the art of monks and poets is useless, if not irresponsible, remaining out of reach of commercial manipulation and ideological justification.

Not long ago I viewed an exhibition at the New York Public Library entitled "Degenerate Art," which consisted of artworks approved by Hitler's regime, along with art the Nazis had denounced. As I walked the galleries it struck me that the real issue was one of control. The meaning of the approved art was superficial, in that its images (usually rigidly representational) served a clear commercial and/or political purpose. The "degenerate" artworks, many crucifixes among them, were more often abstract, with multiple meanings, or even no meaning at all, in the conventional sense. This art—like the best poetry, and also good liturgy—allowed for a wide freedom of response on the part of others; the viewer, the reader, the participant.

Pat Robertson once declared that modern art was a plot to strip America of its vital resources. Using an abstract sculpture by Henry Moore as an example, he said that the material used could more properly have been used for a statue of George Washington. What

do poets mean? Who needs them? Of what possible use are monastic people in the modern world? Are their lives degenerate in the same sense that modern art is: having no easily perceptible meaning yet of ultimate value, concerned with ultimate meanings? Maybe monks and poets know, as Jesus did when a friend, in an extravagant, loving gesture, bathed his feet in nard, an expensive, fragrant oil, and wiped them with her hair, that the symbolic act *matters*; that those who know the exact price of things, as Judas did, often don't know the true cost or value of anything.