

DAYTIME PRAYER

from the Office of the Dead

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Also by Brother Bernard Seif and a part of this series:

(2001). *Office of the Dead*. Lincoln, NE: Writers Club Press / iUniverse.com.

(2002). *VIGILS from the Office of the Dead*. Lincoln, NE: Writers Club Press / iUniverse.com.

(2004). *MORNING PRAYER from the Office of the Dead*. Martinsville, IN: Bookman Publishing & Marketing.

This book is a work of fiction, based on seminal ideas drawn from the life of the author. The characters and situations in this monastic mystery are the product of the author's creative imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any medical or psychological information provided herein is a part of this fictional work and is not presented as a form of diagnosis or treatment.

To Jean and Don, my dear sister and brother-in-law, who make me think of holidays,
because I have celebrated so many in their very welcoming home.

CHAPTER 1

“He has a red turban on and his breath reeks of alcohol. Large brown eyes with red streaks in the whites are staring at me as he speaks. A rifle is slung casually over his right shoulder. Everyone on the train is standing transfixed during our interaction. A baby is crying as we hurtle through the darkness of the Indian countryside. It’s like a bizarre portrait frozen in time.”

Vincent was hyperventilating. His heart rate and blood pressure were clearly elevated. Doctor Fleur was sorely tempted to call a halt to the session but her fine mind speedily processed the risk-benefit ratio for this patient and made a professional decision to continue the clinical hypnosis therapy session.

“You are safe, Vincent. Just keep looking at the split screen in your mind and tell me what is happening now. Remember, a part of you is experiencing this as reality, and another part of you is observing it.”

“I can’t understand what he is saying. The brown man in the military uniform is speaking in English, I believe, but he is so drunk and his words are so heavily accented that it is almost impossible to comprehend his speech. I know that he wants to know where I am going. I tell him Dharmasala, North India. It doesn’t matter to him; I think he wants something more from me but I don’t know what.”

The clinical and forensic psychologist pushed her short dark hair back behind her dainty ears and spoke some calming words: “Very nice. Take a few deep breaths and continue, if you will.”

The thirty-something man on the black leather recliner shook visibly. His olive skin was tinged with pink but he appeared to want to continue speaking. “Ravi is trying to translate but can barely understand this menacing person either. Though both speak Hindi, the soldier has a different accent from Ravi.”

Chantal knew that her next patient was in the waiting room but that there was still some time left to spend with Vincent. She invited him deeper into the trance.

“We are going to dissolve the split screen in your mind now, Vincent. When I count to three, you will begin experiencing the events in the present moment—fully and completely. Is that understood?”

The patient responded with a weak inaudible grunt.

“Very fine. Three... Two... One. What is happening to you now Vincent?”

“The man in the red turban is taking Ravi to another train car. Babies are crying. People are staring. Everyone is afraid to move. The military man has a rifle slung over his shoulder and I’m afraid that if I move he will use it.

“I’m following them at a distance. They stop in the next car, almost falling down as the train wavers, then stand there talking. The guard took Ravi’s wallet and passport earlier. I could see him trying to read the passport but it was upside down. He looked at all of Ravi’s cash in his wallet.

“Why would the guard demand a green card from Ravi? Ravi is an American citizen. Wait. Look. He’s giving Ravi his personal belongings back. I think it’s a shakedown. The man wants a payoff but Ravi has nothing to hide. Ravi is an American citizen and doesn’t need any special papers to travel by train. My friend is slowly walking away and back to our car now.”

“You are doing very well, Vincent. Just keep going.”

“I am terrified. What if the guard uses his rifle? ‘Get back here,’ he is yelling. Ravi just keeps walking as if he does not hear the man in the red turban.

“My friend is passing by me now and whispering: ‘Let’s get back to our car. Just walk slowly like me and I think we will be fine.’ We are walking back now and hoping that the guard is not following us. Everyone is watching in tense silence making the roar of the train deafening. Ravi and I go to our metal bunks for the night. That was the longest few minutes of my life. I don’t think we will get much sleep.”

“When I count from three to one you will awaken, feeling refreshed and better than when we started. You will remember everything and may find that more and more of your memories return gradually over the next few weeks, perhaps during the day, perhaps in dreams.”

The doctor continued soothingly and confidently: “Three, two, and one. Awake and refreshed.”

Vincent opened his squinting eyes and blinked several times, rubbed his eyes, and mopped sweat from his brow with a handkerchief. The underarms of his shirt were ringed with dampness.

“How are you feeling, Vincent?”

“A little shaken, Doctor Fleur. I think I’d rather be at the dentist. I never thought I would prefer root canal to anything else!”

“Hypnotherapy can feel a *little* like pulling teeth sometimes, I know, but you will be glad you had the courage to do this. ‘Refreshing’ old memories, as we call it, can be very unsettling, but it will help us to piece together the missing pieces in your mind.

“Your memory is like a tape recording or a CD, but there are blank spaces in yours and we need to find out what they are and why they were put there.

“Do you have any conscious recollection of a military guard on a train wearing a red turban and carrying a rifle, Vincent?”

“Not before today Doctor, but now that I’ve been through this session, there is something vaguely familiar about that story. And I do remember what went on under hypnosis. You said that is okay, right?”

“Yes, okay, and very normal. We usually do remember what happens in hypnosis. It is only when the memory unearthed is still too traumatic for our conscious mind to deal with that we experience spontaneous amnesia to the hypnosis session. The fact that you remember what happened is a good sign, Vincent.

“Please practice the self hypnosis technique I taught you a few weeks back—the one where you roll your eyes upward while closing your eyelids, remember?”

“Yes Doctor, I do remember it and have been practicing it. Didn’t you say that doing things in two directions at one time, like rolling the eyes upward while lowering the lids helps to confuse the brain?”

“Right. Hypnosis taps our inner mind by circumventing the rigid and logical patterns we usually think with. Under many circumstances, logic is helpful and efficient, but sometimes it can get in the way of accessing what is repressed. When we do something confusional, it breaks the logic barrier, so to speak.

“There is an ancient Asian saying: ‘Confusion precedes enlightenment.’”

“Well, I’m going to be one very enlightened person then, because now I am one very confused guy.”

The doctor gently kept herself on track. “Speaking of memory, I now need to remember that someone is waiting for me in the reception area. Let’s meet again next week, shall we?”

“A part of me says yes and a part of me says no. Another good sign?”

“You’ll have my job soon, Vincent. See you next time.”

CHAPTER 2

Noontime on Saturday in a monastery. The morning is spent cleaning, perhaps some of the afternoon too if need be. The break for prayer and lunch is appreciated by all. Daytime Prayer from the Liturgy of the Hours, the Divine Office, is the shortest of the five communal prayer services which punctuate the various phases of the day and night in a monastic community.

Anthony, beginning his one-month Observership in the small household of monks and nuns, listened devoutly to the final prayer of this ten-minute service:

Let us Pray: Another week has passed, life-giving God, and we celebrate all that we have done well and reflect on what we might have done differently. We offer this all to you. Bless what is good and heal what needs wholeness. Animate us to do your loving will with creativity and generosity in the week to come. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.

The bouquet of flowers in front of the square pine wood altar was just about out of blossoms and the bright colors had muted into a more washed-out version. Liturgically, Sunday begins at Evening Prayer / Vespers, and a fresh bunch of flowers will be picked to replace these dying embers this afternoon. After a final bit of cleaning the small house of prayer would be ready. A whole new week begins at Saturday Evening Prayer in a monastery—everything clean and fresh in preparation for the Sunday solemnity.

The *Angelus*, a brief private devotional set of prayers commemorating the miracle of Jesus becoming flesh, was recited quietly by each member of the community at the end of Daytime Prayer. By ten minutes after twelve, Brother Matthew, Sister Scholastica, Sister Jane de Chantal, Brother Benedict, and Brother Francis, and Anthony made their way from the small, white, barn-like structure where they prayed in common day in and day out, to the larger but modest house for lunch.

Brother Benedict, in his very late sixties and appearing a little shorter than his five foot six inch height these days, pulled several trays of sandwich fixings out of the refrigerator while Sister Jane de Chantal placed a basket of bread on the table. The coffee machine sputtered and gurgled as green tea brewed. Lunch was usually informal and, contrary to breakfast and dinner, the community members engaged in conversation while eating. People sat around informally too—some on the couch, others in chairs or at the table.

Mediterranean looking, with a hint of silver at the edge of his thick black hair, Anthony struggled to fit in—not just at lunch—but also throughout his life. He could relate better to computers than he could to human beings he openly admitted to the Abbot

Francis when he had his initial interview, prior to being invited to do a one-month Observership with the community. This month would give both sides of the equation some time to observe one another prior to the possibility of Anthony entering the first phase of monastic life, known as Postulancy, which is what he was considering doing.

“Sometimes silent meals are easier, Anthony,” offered Brother Matthew, still in his simple or temporary vows. He had only been with the community about five years at this point and was just about fully recovered from a trauma he suffered while he was a novice.

Anthony gave a weak smile in response, while trying to balance a plate of food on his knees as he sat on the sofa in the large room, which served as living room, kitchen, and dining room. Some folks in the Pocono Mountains of Pennsylvania called such a living space a “great room” but that sounded a bit haughty for monastics. “Thanks for the comforting words. All of this is certainly a lot to get used to.”

“Give it time,” Brother Benedict hollered over from the sink. I didn’t enter until I was in my fifties. It does seem to be harder to adapt when we’re older but it certainly can be done. Many people going into monastic life and the clergy these days are older. Not like our Abbot, Brother Francis, who was seventeen years old when he joined monastic life.”

The Abbot just smiled, happy that others were leading the conversation. He was center-stage more than he cared to be.

“Do the math and you will figure out his age!” quipped Sister Jane de Chantal as Sister Scholastica added to the humor by counting on her fingers. “By the way, Sister Scholastica is just above five feet tall, and I’m just below six feet tall. That’s about the only personal data you’ll get from us so don’t even think about *our* ages,” she joked.

Sister Scholastica continued with the group effort to help Anthony feel at home. “We are all pretty much from the northeastern part of America. I understand that you are from California, Anthony. Do I have it right?”

“That’s correct, Sister. I’ve been ‘out West’ as you folks say, all of my life, working as a computer programmer most of my adult life. I made brief visits to several monasteries out there but none of them seemed to attract me. Your Salesian charism is a real draw to me, and the fact that you are a small community, and a dual community of men and women is nice too. You also have people come here for retreat, that appeals to me as well.” He stopped awkwardly, not knowing what to say next or how to end his sharing.

“I’ll bet you see movie stars from time to time in California,” Sister Jane de Chantal said as a way of breaking the silence.

“Yes Sister, I do. In fact, I lived next to Lucille Ball when I was little. There were others around too, but I don’t want to name drop.”

“Not to worry,” interjected Brother Benedict, “we can use a little excitement here sometimes. Feel free to fill us in on your adventures whenever you like. More baloney?” Everyone laughed and Anthony lost his plate of food with a splat.

“Don’t let this group get to you, Anthony. Community life requires a thick skin sometimes and we are just helping you to develop one,” Brother Matthew added as he sipped his green tea in a way indicating that he really enjoyed it.

Clean up was quick and easy. The community dispersed in order to finish up their morning tasks, clean up, rest, and prepare to gather once again for Evening Prayer. The

monastery was quiet again and Anthony found himself in his guest room wondering what he had gotten himself into.

CHAPTER 3

The Oratory held a festive atmosphere at Evening Prayer time. Whereas at Daytime Prayer the community members were in their work clothes and smelled like cleaning products and paint, now they were in their monastic habits. Light gray tunics with navy blue scapulars down the front and back of each person, gathered together with a black leather belt, created a certain relaxed uniformity. The monks had a blue hood attached to the neck of their scapulars and the nuns wore a small blue veil with hair showing in the front.

Flowers, keyboard accompaniment, and candles all announced that a new week had started and that Sunday was beginning. Anthony fumbled with the colored ribbons, which served as bookmarks in his Office Book. Sister Scholastica came over to his pine wood podium-like choir stall and helped the Observer find his way through the celebration of Evening Prayer.

The community quietly piled into two cars and made the two-mile silent journey to the local parish church for the Eucharistic celebration of the vigil of Sunday. The monks and nuns of the early Church joined in with the larger Christian community for Eucharist, but over time they more and more celebrated Eucharist in their own monasteries. The Salesian Monastery, and some other small communities, had returned to the custom of joining with the People of God for Eucharist most of the time.

Though the local parish was about fifty years old, the worshippers had moved from a small wooden frame church to a newly built and much larger church in recent years. In accord with the directives of Vatican Council II, which aimed at revitalizing the Church and the People of God, the parish house of worship was very simple with lots of light and green plants visible behind large clear glass windows. Some parishioners longed for the old days. One woman was overheard telling her husband before Mass: "There are no statues here; I'm going to Saint Matthew's next week." Another person said that he thought that the church looked like a television studio. So much for simplicity!

Anthony was lost in a flurry of page turning during the service. He seemed embarrassed by it, as if he were trying to hide the fact that he was not well able to follow the liturgy.

After dinner some people played cards, took a walk, or just chatted. Recreation lasted for an hour and then there would be Night Prayer. Sister Scholastica invited Anthony to get a little fresh air with her by taking a walk outside. Fall was in the air and the leaves were bursting into a riot of color but were not at their peak yet. As the couple walked down Dairy Lane, they felt as if they had entered into a multicolored tunnel. The trees, still heavy with leaves, formed an arch above them.

"I was wondering if I can help you become more familiar with our liturgical books sometime, Anthony. Perhaps a little class would help you along."

"That would be very helpful, Sister Scholastica," Anthony responded. "I can use all the help I can get."

The nun probed gently. “I’m a little surprised that you are not too familiar with our Liturgy of the Hours or Eucharist. You are Catholic and have spent some time looking into monastic life at other monasteries.”

“Oh that. You see, Sister, I am a *Ukrainian* Catholic. We are all part of the one Roman Catholic Church of course, but our branch of the Church has a much more Eastern liturgy.”

“That explains it,” the nun responded pensively. “Actually I thought you were of Italian descent.”

“My mother’s parents were from the Ukraine, and my father’s parents were from Italy.”

“What a rich background, Anthony! And now you are considering joining a spiritual family which was begun by two French people from the 1500s—Saint Francis de Sales and his spiritual companion Saint Jane de Chantal.

I have a friend who is a Ukrainian Catholic nun. She is in the Order of Saint Basil the Great. I’ve never met anyone who is more joyful. Unfortunately I rarely see her, but when I do its lots of laughs.”

“Tell me more about the community if you would, Sister. I get the impression that you have been through lots of adventures together, and not all of them happy ones.”

“One or another of us, or the entire group, has dealt with sickness, death, murder, international intrigue, romance, marriage, and just about anything else you can think of. We have been written up in the newspapers and gossiped about, but tend to land on our feet. Salesian spirituality is about dealing with what life hands you in the best way possible. Too often our need to control things gets in the way of our peace. I’ll stop now; this is starting to sound like a homily.”

“Not at all, Sister Scholastica, I appreciated hearing your view of the spirituality of your monastery. It’s one thing to read about it in holy books, but quite another to see it alive in other people.”

“Well, I don’t know if I’m such a good example of Salesian spirituality but I certainly do love Jesus and our spiritual teachers, Jane and Francis. Our motto is “Live Jesus!,” translated from *Vive Jesus!* in the French. This can be taken on several levels, you know, let Jesus live in everything, live as Jesus did, Jesus lives within each one who follows him, etc.”

“I guess the peace and wisdom you quietly radiate comes from living monastic life all these years.”

“Actually, Anthony, I’ve not yet taken my solemn or perpetual vows. I am in my late forties and entered the monastery less than ten years ago. If the solemnly professed community votes to accept me for final vows, then it is likely that I will make my solemn monastic profession in the new year.”

“After all these years, the community still has to vote on you?”

“That’s right. You are just starting out and your Observership is simply an informal visit to help us all to get to know one another. Then the various steps of incorporation into the community begin—Postulancy, Novitiate, Simple / Temporary vows, and finally Solemn / Perpetual vows. In our hearts we give ourselves to God and the community formally at Simple profession, but the Church requires a period of vowed probation, temporary vows for about five years prior to a final commitment. The only Order in the Church that makes perpetual vows immediately after completing their

novitiate years is the Jesuits. They seem to do lots of things differently. Saint Francis de Sales loved them—but that’s a story for another time. Here we are back at the monastery already.”

“Thanks for the walk and the conversation, Sister. It really helped. I think that you are going to be a special friend. By the way, what was your life like before you entered monastic life, may I ask?”

She hesitated. “Perhaps that would be best left for another time. However, even though I’ll do whatever I can to help you, Anthony, we are all in this together. The others will be gentle but firm with you also.”

“Gentle but firm?”

“That’s the maxim we try to live by and two of the main virtues we strive to follow as Salesians. Some think that being a Christian is being a wimp, but it requires a great deal of strength. There I go again giving a homily. See you at Night Prayer, Anthony.”

As they parted ways, the Oratory bell began to peal. The sound of the bell in a monastery is taken to be the voice of God calling the community to prayer. The community gathered in the Oratory as the sun was setting. Golden streams of light blended with darkness and painted the natural wood interior of the small chapel.

The Night Prayer Office includes a reflection about or raising of consciousness to the choices one made during the day past. Older theology called this an “Examination of *Conscience*,” which typically only included sinful actions and infractions against the Rule of the monastery. A revitalized theology takes a more wholistic and positive view of this review of the day and calls it an “Examination of *Consciousness*.” How mindful or aware were we during the day of God’s presence? What positive choices did we make? Did we celebrate them? Where is God inviting me to grow stronger?

Standing at their choir stalls, the community reflected on the day. Anthony became restless. He had read somewhere that monastic life is not so much about avoiding sin as it is about practicing virtue, e.g., charity, patience, prudence, and the like. Was he still fighting sin or was his focus now more on the practice of virtue? If so, which virtue was he focusing on? Which dominant fault was his trying to uproot? “All through love, nothing through fear.” That’s what Saint Francis de Sales says, isn’t it?

The Observer distractedly chanted through the psalms in the softly lit Oratory. The final prayers and chants of Night Prayer were followed by the sprinkling of Holy Water upon the head of each person by Abbot Francis. Anthony prayed for a renewal of his life, a changing from what was to what he was on the brink of becoming.

Later in his cell, the monastic equivalent of a simple bedroom, he felt the increasing sense of tension deep inside that was so very familiar to him. He prayed that it would pass. Finally, mercifully, sleep took him.

CHAPTER 4

Like many families do, the custom of the monastery was to clip a scrap of paper to the refrigerator with a magnet as an evolving shopping list. The nuns and monks simply wrote down their needs, or what was running low, and the shopper would pick them up on his or her weekly trip to the super market. Sister Scholastica dug deeply in the folds

of her habit for her Cross pen, given to her as a Christmas gift, and nicer than the usual plastic Bics the community depended upon as writing instruments.

“I’m forever losing pens,” she mumbled to no one special—for no one was around. “I did pretty well in hanging on to my silver one from last Christmas. It will turn up. In the meanwhile, it’s back to Bics.” The small-framed woman scribbled “eggs” on the shopping list and went back to preparing the evening meal.

Some of the members ate meat, and some were vegetarian. Many of their meals included “fake” chicken, hamburgers, sausage patties, and hot dogs. The monks and nuns had become rather expert in these soy / tofu products. *Some* brands provided lots of mortification—death to one’s own will. Other brands tasted pretty good. “Morningstar Farms” was the universally agreed upon favorite for “fake” meat in the monastery. Tonight’s meal would include Morningstar Farms fake chicken patties with whole-wheat hamburger rolls.

After Evening Prayer, the community assembled around the dinner table. An audiotope of the now deceased Trappist monk Thomas Merton was playing as the community shared a meal in reflective silence. Merton, a pioneer in the area of East-West spirituality dialogue spoke to his novices on the tape about the monastic vow called Conversion of Life. He was not speaking of the avoidance of wrongdoing, which we struggle with to some degree all of our lives. Merton was talking about a purification of heart and the practice of virtue. It takes several large *metanoias*, or deep changes of heart, to sustain a monastic vocation. One conversion simply gets the monastic into the monastery; a few other major ones help to keep the person there when things get rough, especially during the early years in community. Not too different from marriage, when one thinks about it.

The Salesian Monastery welcomed guests for retreat from time to time. They simply joined in with the community to the degree that they wished. Some came for a day or weekend, others stayed for a week or even longer. Several men and women arrived shortly after Anthony began his Observership. One woman was from New York City and grateful for a little relief from the corporate world. A man from Lancaster County PA also arrived fatigued from his house painting business. A young man from New Jersey who worked in the family produce business was also at the monastery for retreat. He had lost his right arm in an accident of some sort several years prior and seemed to have adjusted well to the new challenges the situation presented daily. Fortunately, he had always been left-handed.

The first week of Observership went by uneventfully. The monastic community, Observer, and guests fell into a rhythm of life easily, thanks in large part to the monastery Rule and horarium, or daily schedule.

One evening during recreation, Anthony and Brother Matthew sat and chatted on the barn red porch of the white building that served as the main monastery building. They were surrounded by green vegetation splashed with color as fall continued to announce its arrival. Rain fell softly upon the rooftop and the foliage. A few birds did their evening exercise in the air prior to sleep.

“So, how are you making out Anthony?”

“I’m okay, Brother Matthew, still trying to fit in, you know.”

“I surely do. My Postulancy and Novitiate were a real struggle for me.

Observership was easy, because I thought I knew what I wanted—this life. After making

my entrance more formal by being accepted as a Postulant, however, something changed. The fact that, even though I was at a very *beginning* phase, I was now a part of the community and it gave me the willies! I had been engaged to be married prior to that but broke it off to enter here.”

“That surprises me, Brother. You seem so content.”

“I am content, Anthony, but that doesn’t mean that I have not struggled. If you really try to live life honestly then I think hard choices present themselves and one needs to respond, not just put them off. We have so many people who come here to discern their vocations but they really don’t want to commit. Have your cake and eat it too sort of thing. They are not open to really changing and *becoming* a monk or a nun—a lifelong process. That Conversion of Life thing Merton was talking about last week on our audiotape at the evening meal one night.”

Anthony fidgeted in his creaky old aluminum and wood folding chair and sounded a little angry. “I have my own personality and interests. Am I expected to give all of that up?”

Brother Matthew spoke gently. “Not *all* of it by any means. We each need to bring to the community our own unique gifts, talents, and personalities. It’s just that each monastery has a Rule of life and charism or spirit that it follows. I suppose the challenge is to see if the spirit of the monastery and our spirit are a good match—does living this life enhance who we are or does it stifle us. Listen to me, a youngster to this life and younger than you talking like this.”

Anthony spoke hesitantly. “That’s no problem at all. It really helps me. You see, sometimes a certain tension builds up within me and I fear doing something harmful.”

“You mean something that may weaken the desire you have to become a monk, or provoke us to ask you to leave the community?”

“Something like that,” the Observer mumbled with eyes downcast.

“Has anyone seen my Office Book? Not the ones we use in the Oratory, but the one I keep in my room,” questioned Sister Jane de Chantal one day after Daytime Prayer.

“You took it with you to Pocono Auto when you took the Olds in for repairs last week and used it while you were waiting there, didn’t you?” answered Brother Benedict.

“That’s right, but I thought that I had it since then and can’t seem to find it. It’s not in my room. I don’t think I left it at Pocono Auto, but maybe I’ll give them a call just in case.”

“Some mechanic is probably addicted to the Divine Office,” joked Brother Benedict.

“They are so nice to us over there, you may be right. I sometimes think that some of those guys would be a good choice for a doctor—*lots* of time spent with them—and all sorts of machines for diagnosing things.”

The retreatant from New Jersey joined in the lunchtime chatter. “I’ve had lots of doctors and mechanics during my life. I think it is the quality of the person that matters most. You know that if you are honest and try to follow through, eventually something good will come of it. If you are deceptive and don’t care, it only leads to frustration.”

“Lots of wisdom there,” added Sister Jane de Chantal with a smile. She continued: “Anthony, you look especially relaxed, or is it *relieved*?”

“I’m feeling good these days, Sister. Guess I’m starting to adjust to community life.”

“It never completely happens,” Brother Benedict added. “The life itself calls us to adjust continually. I suppose that’s what Saint Francis de Sales and Saint Jane de Chantal mean when they invite us to be like a ball of wax in the hand of God.”

The New Jersey guest retreatant commented, sounding like a New Yorker in his speech. “A ball of wax is a much gentler image than fire and brimstone. I would like to get to know more about your spiritual mother and father.”

“There are lots of books and tapes around here. I’ve been through most of them and now use them more for devotional purposes rather than educational,” mentioned Sister Scholastica, trying to be helpful to the guest.

CHAPTER 5

Brother Matthew was a great one for creating community adventures. “Well, since we are all in such good moods, why don’t we take a hike in the Delaware Water Gap this week end?”

His suggestion received unanimous approval.

Soon it was Sunday afternoon and the gang piled into two cars. In about fifteen minutes they were crossing the bridge from Pennsylvania into New Jersey, the Delaware River flowing peacefully below them. The town of Delaware Water Gap, locally famous for the Deerhead Inn and other folk and craft establishments, was in Pennsylvania and offered several trails through the huge cleft in the earth, which made up the Gap. The Gap itself spanned both Pennsylvania and New Jersey.

The two cars made a right into the parking lot for the Visitor’s Center just after they crossed the bridge. Several men and women Rangers, complete with Smokey the Bear outfits on, stood behind a long counter and expertly helped hikers and visitors choose trails to hike and places of beauty and interest to explore.

The monastic hikers chose Sunfish Pond as their destination. The hike would take about four hours total and was an uphill climb, with the Pond at the top. They ambled by streams and waterfalls and started out on their journey quite animated. Lots of laughter and stories were shared. Eventually the group became more contemplative and broke into little groups, quietly sharing thoughts about the week past or life in general.

Brother Matthew’s thick brown hair, along with the rainbow of leaves overhead, protected his scalp from the warm sunlight. Just the same he eventually wanted to put on his baseball cap. He rummaged around in his backpack for his headgear. “Let’s see,” he mumbled, “We have a bag of peanuts, a chocolate bar from our community friend Dotty, a book about the friendship between Saint Jane and Saint Francis called *Bond of Perfection*, and a lightweight jacket. Hmm, no cap. I’m sure that I put it in the pack, but I guess it must be back at the monastery.”

“Are people who devote their lives to contemplation always so forgetful?” queried Anthony.

“Maybe so,” Brother Matthew responded thoughtfully. “I guess thinking so much about the God of heaven keeps our heads in the clouds. Though this is the first time I can

remember that so many of us are losing little things. Usually we pay pretty good attention to detail.”

The road along the Kittatinny Ridge, which they were hiking, became very rocky. It would be easy to twist an ankle on this route. After a hike of about two hours the small band saw Sunfish Pond glistening before them, calling out to them to rest and refresh themselves. This body of water is a Registered National Landmark in New Jersey. It is the first glacier-formed lake along the Appalachian Trail heading north. The pH level of the water makes the Pond crystal clear and fosters the life of the Sunfish who inhabit it, but not other species of fish.

The hikers found quiet places to be alone for a while and reflect. Such natural hermitages were quite easy to find among the tall and dense vegetation and rocks that surround Sunfish Pond. The stillness magnified the sounds of the birds, frogs, and other wildlife that made this place their home.

Brother Matthew, try as he might to keep his focus on the mantra he had been using for meditation in recent days, could not do so. The “Healer of my soul” repeated over and over was drowned out by a question that lightly nagged at the back of his mind.

Why were little things disappearing around the monastery? Why waste my time thinking about it? Maybe it was nothing; maybe it was something. Our community has a way of attracting unusual occurrences.

He tried again: “Healer of my soul, healer of my soul, healer of my soul.” It was going a little better now that the young monk had admitted to himself that something unsettled him. His mind settled and he was absorbed in God.

In a flash the one-hour of allotted meditation time was over and the group re-gathered at the trail that would take them back down the mountain to the parking lot and Route 80. The trek back was easier because it was downhill all the way.

The hikers peacefully descended the mountain, enjoying nature as they walked. Somehow their meditation heightened their senses and everything was more colorful and alive to them now.

“This area has such a rich history,” Brother Matthew mentioned to nobody in particular. About 18,000 years ago a large glacier gouged out a hollow. That hollow filled with water and became Sunfish Pond. One historian described the Pond as a ‘sheet of pure transparent water...strangely and unaccountably situated on the very summit of the mountain.’”

Sister Scholastica wondered aloud: “Didn’t some millionaire live in this area way back?”

“My interest in history sometimes serves me well, Sister Scholastica. Yes, a businessman named Charles Worthington owned about 8,000 acres spanning both sides of the Delaware River and had a small mansion here—if there is such a thing as a small mansion. Sunfish Pond supplied the water for his home. He knew what to do with getting the water to his residence because he was President of the Worthington Pump Corporation in the early 1900s. He did his hunting in the surrounding forest.”

Anthony joined in the conversation. “I don’t know how many ‘greats’ are involved, but Charles Worthington was a great grandfather of mine. It is wonderful to be here and finally see this area. Now I know why the family stories about Great Grandfather Worthington lived on in our family line from generation to generation, down to the present.” The Observer to monastic life seemed proud and confident.

The others questioned Anthony for more details he might know about his distant relative. What he had already shared was about all he knew.”

“Maybe we can do an internet search about Charles Worthington,” Sister Jane de Chantal suggested. “You know, trace his family tree or something. I believe the Mormons are expert at helping people find their roots and I think they have a genealogy website.”

Anthony gave a half-hearted “Yes” to the suggestion. It appeared as if someone had just knocked the wind out of his sails.

CHAPTER 6

The Office of Compline, Night Prayer, had a way of wrapping the monastery in a peaceful stillness at each nightfall. After that prayer service, the Grand Silence would begin and conclude after breakfast the following morning. Unlike the simple silence of the day, which could be broken out of charity or necessity, Grand Silence required a stronger reason to speak.

During the night silence the community was able to sink more deeply into the contemplative spirit, most people quietly reading or working in their rooms on a craft or personal needs, then settling into sleep.

There was an unaccounted for person lurking about during Grand Silence this evening. No one really saw her, so she could spend a quiet night at the monastery too. She would probably be gone before dawn anyway.

I've got to watch out for him. This little community has been in the news a lot--even though they say that they are semi-cloistered and would prefer to live simply and quietly.

He's new here, probably won't stay anyway. In the meanwhile I'd better protect him from the others. They seem to be a prying lot. Why do they need to know so much about the background of a person before they accept him or her?

I remember that Tibetan Abbot asking about Christian monastics. He had heard that it was a difficult and slow process to become a full-fledged monk or nun in the Christian tradition. When someone explained that this was certainly the case he just laughed and laughed, then said: “That's probably why you Christians have so few monks and nuns!”

Maybe I'll just check things out here on the property. Everyone seems to be asleep and I can't sleep. Hope the floorboards don't creak. A woman walking around in the men's sleeping quarters, even on the lower floor, is sure to capture attention if someone spots me. Good thing I disguised myself.

Yep, everyone is asleep—a few are even snoring. Good, got downstairs and outside without a hitch. Let's see if I can get into the main building and check out the files. It's nice to know the background of the people I have to deal with in order to protect him.

Drat, the front door is locked. Maybe there is a spare key in the lower level of the guest house, below the men's quarters. I'll slip back and see.

The glow of the moon is beautiful as I walk across the property. Too bad things are not always what they appear to be.

Hmm, desk, cupboards, table with drawers, where to begin? The desk looks interesting. Not much in it except writing paper, envelopes, pens, and some post cards with photos of the monastery on them.

This old breakfront might hold some keys. It opens easily but only has extra blankets and pillows in it—also a game of Scrabble and a game of Uno—very well used.

I think that I hear a little rattle as I close the doors. Something is tapping at the back of the breakfront. Just a slip of the hand should do it. There they are! Several keys hanging on a key ring. Not marked. Bet they are for the front door of the main house in case of emergency.

Thank you Man in the Moon for lighting my way and letting everything else remain in darkness. First key doesn't work—the second one does! Quiet now, I'm trying to protect him, not get him into trouble.

Through the foyer and into the great room. That old buffet is probably a catch all for things. There are no locks on it, however, so whatever is inside is probably not too important.

The drawers and doors are old and squeak a little. Slowly, slowly. There, the large middle drawer is open. Looks like a lot of mailing equipment—scale, stapler, blank mailing labels, padded mailing bags. Must be for the things they sell mail order.

The two slimmer drawers on top are filled with old audio-tapes and papers, nothing very personal.

Someone is stirring downstairs in the women's quarters. I'd better get out of here. Come to think of it, anything personal about the community members is probably over in the Hermitage, the Abbot's quarters, anyway.

She tiptoed out into the silver night and across the driveway. The second key on the ring let her into the white mobile home purchased about ten years ago to stretch the quarters of the monastery. She froze in the doorway marked "Welcome" upon hearing a single beeping sound. No other audible alarm sounded.

I pray that there is no silent alarm hooked up. Hopefully that beep is just there to let the Abbot know that someone is in his waiting room. One more beep sounded as the specter-like figure closed the door behind her.

The rest room was in front of her and the small reception area was to her right. Several framed diplomas and licenses hung on the walls and a large tonka of the Medicine Buddha, given to the Abbot by a group of dear friends while he was in Tibet and neighboring lands, gave off a dark blue aura under the bath of moonlight flowing in through the window.

There's his office, complete with a name plate on the door, and the door is wide open. Well, well, well, what have we here? Looks like a filing cabinet to me. Drat! It's locked. Where would the key be? Maybe in the desk at the front right of this rectangular office space. Too many odds and ends in the desk—and on it!

Where is that light coming from? Someone is outside, I'm sure of it. I'll just lift up a slat on this mini-blind and risk it. It's a woman and she's walking this way. No, wait a minute, she's heading toward the Oratory now. Must be a late night meditator. Get me out of here while the coast is relatively clear. Good, she's inside the Oratory now and has left the lights off. Hopefully she won't hear the beep of the door.

Out I go and if she is not looking out the window I'm safe. Made it back to the men's guest house without incident. I'd better just hide out for a while.

Sister Scholastica, alone in the quiet of the darkened Oratory, was starting to get the creeps.

CHAPTER 7

Brother Francis was overwhelmed. India is enormous and can literally assault every sense organ.

How about that lady at the bus station in Delaware Water Gap asking if I was a member of AARP! The truth be told, I am certainly old enough to be a card-carrying member but I have not joined.

People are so kind. The ticket seller in the next booth made me laugh when she poked her head around the dividing wall and gave a stage whisper to her colleague: "He's clergy." Technically I am a "Religious," one publicly bound to God by vows and a rule of life, including the celebration of the Liturgy of the Hours daily in the name of the Church

At any rate, I don't know how she knew I was a monk but I think I got an even bigger discount for that than for an AARP membership. I did have to hand the bus driver that ticket with "CHARITY" computer printed in large bold type, however.

The Abbot of the Salesian Monastery had taken a bus from Pennsylvania, and then another bus from Port Authority in Manhattan to get to JFK airport in New York. Since he never flew out of JFK before, Brother Francis gave himself a large time allowance to get to the airport. The cleaning staff must have thought that the monk was having a crisis of faith. Every once in a while a cleaner would push his or her cart past one of the four small houses of worship entered through large glass doors inside the JFK terminal and Brother Francis would be in yet another prayer space.

He started out in the All Faiths Chapel. It had white walls and splashes of rose here and there on the white. The stained glass windows in the front of the square room portrayed no particular picture or event but their pastel shades were conducive to meditation and an oasis of calm from the frenetic activity of the airport proper.

The monk next made his way to the Catholic Chapel. The Word of God and the Blessed Sacrament were there to welcome him. He celebrated Daytime Prayer alone there from his Office Book.

Brother Francis excitedly waited in line at the ticket counter. The signs were vague and it was a little difficult to see just where the snaking queue of travelers ended up. Eventually a ground attendant came along and Francis found out that he was in a line for Tokyo. The ticket counter for Air India and his flight would open in a few hours, he was told.

His travel arrangements from Delhi to Dharmasala in northern India was made by a friend of a friend in India and consisted of an overnight bus ride. Several people said: "Don't take the bus." It was too late; arrangements were made. It would be fine he told himself unconvincingly.

The monk wandered the huge halls of JFK Airport keeping an eye out for his traveling companion. Andre was a mix of laughter and seriousness, quietness and assertiveness. A naturopathic medical student, he hailed from Montreal and had a slight French Canadian lilt to his soft voice.

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