

MORNING PRAYER

from the Office of the Dead

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

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

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 murder 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 my brother Dan, now with God, and to my dear sister-in-law Rita.

Chapter 1

No murder or mayhem at the moment thought the monk as he settled himself on his wooden prayer bench in the Oratory. I haven't stumbled over a dead body or had to deal with anyone in our community being kidnapped in a long while. Not even a novice having recurring nightmares has disturbed my peace of mind! Underneath Brother Francis' reflection concerning gratitude for a relatively calmer existence was a lower-case question mark. Perhaps he was not so sure he liked things this way.

He spoke to his Master. Thank you, Jesus, for inviting me to found this small monastic community. We usually have about six members, plus or minus one or two. You called me from a more active form of religious life to lead a more monastic expression of the vowed life, but it seems that I am busier than ever. The most important thing is keeping my mind and heart fixed on you, Rabbi Jesus.

It seemed to Brother Francis that Christ was in agreement with his assessment of the vocation to which he had been called. The prayer bench he sat on to meditate hinted of the mysteries of the East. He would start by simply kneeling down and then place the low bench made of pinewood over his ankles. Two pieces of wood formed the sides and a flat top, tilted slightly forward, completed the meditation aid. When Francis would sit back on the bench, he was about eight inches off the floor, but his mind and heart would be soaring to the heavens.

Francis' meditations were more contemplative and non-verbal than they had been many years ago. He would often take a mantra, a simple word or phrase, and repeat it over and over again. Sometimes Francis would repeat the mantra in rhythm with his breath--once on each exhalation. One of his favorite mantras came from Asia and is used there by millions of people everyday.

Loving Kindness Mantra

May I be filled with loving kindness,
May I be well.
May I be peaceful and at ease,
May I be happy.

At times Francis would change the pronoun to "may *he* or *she* or *they* be filled with loving kindness." He did this especially when he found someone difficult to deal with. If he was praying for that person, Francis thought that his heart, if not his feelings, was in the right place. When the Abbot focused on his breathing during meditation he would expand his lower abdomen on an inhalation and relax it on an exhalation over and over again, thus bringing body, mind, and spirit into oneness.

Whatever tool Francis chose from the many he had learned as a novice, or from his spiritual reading, or from Asian hospital rotations and monastic adventures there, his goal was always union with God and honesty with self. This morning, however, his prayer was more conversational than usual. He believed that the Holy Spirit is the one who really leads the prayer and that it is up to us to respond simply and in freedom. Today the Holy Spirit seemed to be leading him toward an informal chat with Jesus.

Recently Francis had celebrated the forty-year anniversary of his entrance into monastic life. During all of those years his constant prayer was the Liturgy of the Hours, more commonly known as the "Divine Office" prior to the liturgical updating of Vatican Council II, which is the public or common prayer of the Church. This set of prayer services is said throughout the world. Originally they were chanted in Latin, but since the Council, they are said in the vernacular language of the local region. The Liturgy of the Hours is a way to celebrate and consecrate the various stages of the day and night to God, and Francis found these periodic services helpful during the course of his busy days, in bringing him back to the reason he became a monk in the first place.

The Abbot was not sure which part, or Hour, of the Office he liked the best. At certain times of his life Francis was deeply drawn to the Office of Vigils, which is a nocturnal prayer service, said sometime the previous evening or during the night, but certainly before dawn. The somewhat lengthy readings of that Hour fed his soul and educated him about scripture and the liturgical feast or season being celebrated.

The rhythm of Francis' prayer and daily life was drawing him these days toward the Office called Morning Prayer. In the old Latin way of referring to this Office, it was called *Lauds*. This word simply means praise.

Like the other Offices, which include Midday Prayer (generically called Daytime Prayer because it can be prayed as Midmorning, Midday, or Midafternoon Prayer), Evening Prayer, and Night Prayer, this liturgical service is made up largely of Psalms.

The Psalms were sung by our Jewish sisters and brothers and reflect their faith in the Creator as someone who led them from slavery to freedom. Many times this slavery and freedom is an inner experience. The monastic doctor had often seen very poor and sick people who had great inner freedom, while the materially wealthy and healthy were sometimes much enslaved. The inner journey was the real one for him.

Francis had been to Israel on two occasions and felt deeply about the need to pray and work for freedom for all peoples. He saw places of imprisonment, destruction, and violence juxtaposed against all of the famous places that make up the sites where Biblical events occurred throughout the whole Judeo-Christian experience.

The Office of the Vigils had been celebrated in the dark and early hours of that day and the time of quiet meditation followed. The founder was preparing his mind and heart to celebrate Morning Prayer, which would begin shortly, with the community. Nature was joining in the preparation, hinting at sunrise by streaking the sky with a bit of red, orange, gold, and pink. In addition to the chanting of the Psalms, with antiphons setting the theme for the various feasts of the liturgical calendar, Morning and Evening Prayer had a reading from scripture as a focal point and then some intercessory prayers to God for the Church in general. These prayers were verbalized and then there was a period of time where the community members and guests of the monastery could voice their own petitions to God.

Petitionary prayer is yet another form of prayer. Francis often thought that people made too much of petitionary prayer. His focus was very much on prayer as a vehicle for relating to someone whom he loved, and not so much a "give me, give me, give me" kind of relationship, yet he knew that we do have the freedom to ask for what we need from friends and loved ones and he did that too with his God.

Following the petitions at Morning Prayer, a canticle from the Bible known as the *Benedictus* in Latin is chanted every day. In English it is often referred to as "Zachary's Canticle." This song is a way of rejoicing in the new day, the new life that one finds in spirituality, and is also a reminder of Jesus' resurrection early on a Sabbath morning.

Even though Francis wondered about his favorite Office and found his opinion changing, moving through the various Offices as he moved through life, the Canticle of Zachary continued to be one of his favorite expressions of prayer from the Scriptures.

The door behind him and to his right opened, and in came one of the nuns from the community. She lit a candle on the altar and rang the bell, which called the other members of the community to prayer. The bell is revered as the voice of God in a monastery--calling the community together to worship.

One of the monks entered next, along with a few men and women who were there on retreat, and before long there was a community of about eight members gathered to support one another in reverencing their God breaking through into the new day.

Because it was a Sunday morning, incense was lit on the altar to add to the festivities. The aroma of this particular incense was sandalwood, and its smoke rose from a pewter incense holder.

At this point the meditating monk was doing some belly breathing and the sandalwood aroma wafted toward him, taking him back in his mind and heart to various trips he had made to Asia as a younger monk. He found himself welling up with thoughts and feelings of gratitude that the God of surprises had created the opportunity for him to become a naturopathic doctor specializing in Chinese medicine, as well as a clinical psychologist specializing in behavioral medicine. Some of the patients referred to office visits with the monk / doctor as "one-stop shopping."

Francis rose up off of his prayer bench and slid it under the chair behind his choir stall. The chairs were new. (Only the *best* would do in this monastery.) They were delivered via UPS after having been ordered on the Internet from Staples. The choir stalls--podiums of pinewood used to hold an open book in front of

someone who was chanting the Divine Office and capable of storing a few books underneath on a shelf--were made by Brother Benedict of their monastery. Francis sat in his chair and made his "Direction of Intention."

St. Jane de Chantal and St. Francis de Sales, founders of this entire world-wide family of monks and nuns, committed lay women and men, and priests and religious brothers, encourage the members of their spiritual family to make such a Direction of Intention. It is really an offering of oneself, and acceptance of all that occurs, upon rising in the morning and frequently throughout the day before their various activities, including times of prayer. Francis offered his prayer to God, embracing whatever experiences of consolation or desolation, clarity of mind or distraction that would occur therein. After that he rapped on the wooden wall to his left with his knuckle as a sign for the assembled community to stand and begin their celebration.

He intoned, "O God, come to my assistance." The community responded with, "O Lord, make haste to help me." The group in the Oratory stood and bowed in unison from their waists chanting, "Glory to you, Source of all being, Eternal Word and Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now and will be forever. Amen. Alleluia." It was Sister Jane's turn to play the keyboard accompanying the chanting, so Brother Francis sat in his chair and sung the Psalms with the group. He listened attentively to the reading of Scripture and poured his heart out in petitionary prayer as the needs of people all over the world were prayed for. He asked God for the strength to do whatever he could do actively to help some of those needs so that his prayer would not be simply words. He knew well, however, the power of God to listen to those words and act on them. When the Canticle of Zachary was intoned, Francis stood with the others and sang in a new and more vibrant way that blessed canticle which Zachary sung in prophecy when his son, John the Baptist, was born.

Something deep in the heart of the Abbot knew that an adventure was brewing. Maybe it was simply wishful thinking, but his intuition was reputed to be rather sharp--and he could feel a rumbling in the atmosphere.

Canticle of Zachary

+Blessed are you, God of Israel
for you have turned your face towards your people and set us free,
and have raised up a horn of salvation for us
in the house of your servant.
As you spoke through the mouths
of your holy prophets of long ago,
that we should be saved from our enemies
and from the hand of all who oppress us;
to perform the mercy promised to our ancestors,
and to remember your holy covenant,
the oath you swore to Abraham and Sarah,
to grant us deliverance from evil,
that we might serve you without fear,
in holiness and righteousness
all the days of our lives.
And you, little child,
will be called the prophet of the Most High,
for you will go before the Holy One
to prepare God's ways,
to give knowledge of salvation to God's people
in the forgiveness of their sins,
because the heart of our God is full of mercy towards us,
the day shall dawn upon us from on high
to give light to those who sit in darkness
and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet

into the path of peace.

The service concluded with Brother Francis chanting a prayer to sum up or collect the thoughts and feelings of the group. Then he gave his blessing to the community. It was time for breakfast.

Chapter 2

Silent people drifted out, one or two at a time, and made their way to the main building for a meal prepared by the Abbot. Francis believed that he got off easily just cooking on Sunday mornings. He typically alternated between making Cream of Wheat and Quaker Oats. When he was especially motivated, Francis would make whole-wheat pancakes, rationalizing that perhaps the whole-wheat in the pancakes helped to balance out the syrup that usually bathed his creations.

The community and guests ate in silence, each filling his or her plate and finding a place to sit. Some remained at the table while others wandered out onto the porch, or even a little further down the steps and onto a bench next to a little fountain trickling with water which glistened in the sunlight. When most of the people were finished with their breakfast, hellos were exchanged and animated conversation followed as the dishes were washed and food put away.

The community tried very hard to keep Sunday as a true day of rest. No shopping was done and no laundry was washed. Sometimes one member or another would go off to the woods to spend some quiet time hiking and praying, another person might visit a friend in the area, and perhaps Brother Francis would choose to visit his Tibetan Buddhist friends in New Jersey. Whatever was done was for the refreshment and renewal of the members of the community. Guests living there for retreat would continue their silence, perhaps taking a long walk in nature or sitting outdoors with a spiritual book, luxuriating in the fact that they had a little time and space in their busy lives to do such a things.

As for Francis, he went over to his white mobile home Hermitage on the monastery grounds and changed from his blue scapular and cowl and gray tunic into a red tee shirt complete with a gold dragon painted on the front. A pair of black Asian pants that looked much like sweat pants but were made of light cotton rather than a heavier material completed the change.

The Catholic monk with Eastern training made his way around to the back of the Hermitage which made up his office, waiting room, and cell, and knelt down on the ground, touched his forehead to the earth, then lingered there for a moment. Francis stood up and began shaking his left arm and shoulder all the way down to the fingertips. He then willed his right arm into that same kind of activity. Next he raised his left foot off the ground and began shaking his left leg, loosening it up from the hip joint down to his toes and then, after putting his left foot back on the ground, began shaking the right leg in a similar fashion.

It was a fall day and the sun was warm and refreshing to him, and created a beautiful harmony with the gentle breeze that was blowing. The yang of the sun and the yin of the breeze fashioned a vibrant, life giving balance within the heart, mind, and body of the monk. Brother Francis continued this first part of his practice, called "Shaking the Tree," for a good ten minutes. This was one of the many simple exercises he often did to warm up for his qigong practice.

Loosening up the body in this way is akin to a farmer plowing the field in preparation for planting. The physical body becomes loose and receptive to the simple, choreographed movements that make up any of the thousands of forms of qigong that are done in a more systemized fashion. *If anyone sees me, I hope he or she doesn't call the rescue squad,* he thought.

Francis had made an offering of his practice when he touched his head to the ground, giving it to God to be used for the highest or greatest good of all creation. Having warmed up, he now he extended his arms in front of him, brought his hands together palm to palm in front of his heart, and thought of all of creation surging within him. He was now the "Meditating Buddha."

The series of qigong exercises he was doing is considered by the Chinese to be a means of cleansing the body, mind, and spirit, even to the very core of one's being, even to the very marrow of the bones. Francis stood in a standing meditation pose and then let himself be absorbed by the power of all of creation crackling to

life within him. He let his arms relax at his sides and then extend upwards, floating up until his arms were parallel to his shoulders and next moved his hands so that the palms of his hands faced outward so that his body formed a cross. In this standing meditation posture, Francis became a “Cosmic Being.”

He next used his mind’s eye to go “beyond the beyond.” Francis experienced infinity reaching into his spirit beyond horizons, beyond all that is. The monk experienced the endlessness of creation flowing through him, all around him, entering one hand and exiting the other, entering up through one leg and exiting out the next, coming down through the top of his head, and moving out to his tailbone. Every aspect of his being was caught up in this vortex of creation that God had manifested by uttering the Hebrew scriptural word *ruwach* when God created everything in the Genesis story--and saw that it was good.

Francis now cleansed his bone marrow, as the Chinese see it, by placing the back of his left hand at his kidneys and letting his right arm float up his side and eventually letting the palm face down over the top of his head, the *bai hui* in Chinese. Then his hand floated down in front of him in a cleansing motion, as if he were pushing all the negative or contaminated qi within him into the earth to be recycled.

He reversed his arm movements and did the same movements again, completing one set. Francis did three sets of “Cleansing the Bone Marrow with one Hand” before he completed the whole process by placing both hands in front of him, palms facing upward and moving up the trunk of his body, flipping the palms around to the heavens when they got up around his chest he continued up above his head, connecting his palms with the sky, turning them down and letting them both slide down in front of him for one last movement known as “Cleansing the Bone Marrow with both Hands.”

Francis was now ready to do a full form of qigong. He knew a number of forms and often rotated them, partially to keep himself fresh and alive, and partially to remember the forms for teaching. Today he chose one of the forms he learned long ago when he first started practicing qigong. This form has a movement for each of the five elements or energies that make up the blueprint of Chinese medicine.

He moved his body and mind in a way meant to invite *fire* into his being. He then moved in a dance-like fashion, creating a circle of the *earth*. Next he moved in a manner that obviously indicated that his arms were inviting *air* into his being. This was followed by a movement designed to draw *water* from the heavens, not so much physical water, but the very energy or quality that water shares as it brings life to others. He stood as if he were hugging a tree or holding a large pot in front of him, to evoke the qualities of *wood* in his being.

Having done this once, Francis turned his feet a quarter turn to the right and did the same set again. That completed, Francis turned another quarter turn and did the same set again. Francis turned another quarter turn and did the same set for a fourth time, and with one more quarter turn was back where he started and did a final set of Five Element moves.

Francis felt invigorated and cleansed. He also experienced a renewed sense of balance and harmony in his life. All of the five elements he had just thought about and tried to evoke with his qigong movements surrounded him, moved with him, and lifted him to an altered state. Francis knew well that the marriage of science and spirituality was doing far better these days than in the past. He had been invited to give a one week graduate course on science and spirituality at a graduate school of theology in Oklahoma and had concepts related to these topics churning in the back of his mind. He was trying to prepare a good experience for his future students and had been gathering notes and materials for some time now.

The monk sat down in a white vinyl lawn chair--this item from K-Mart--not Staples. He joined the thumb and first finger on each hand together, thus creating a circle or circuit of energy in each hand. He then lightly touched the tip of his tongue to the back of his upper front palate to make another inner circuit or connection, and let the bulk of the qi or life force within settle into his lower abdomen, the *dan tian* in Chinese and the center of the human person in Chinese medicine.

After meditating in this fashion for about twenty minutes, Francis returned to the front of the Hermitage and went inside. In medieval times monastics used quill pens to illuminate manuscripts, but today they use computers. He was about to check his e-mail, but before he could the telephone rang. This was somewhat providential because he had only one telephone line, which was shared by e-mail, phone, and fax. If he were on the Internet, the caller would get a busy signal.

On a personal level, Francis had little desire to use modern technology, but as a doctor he knew its value. Each of the members of the community did what he or she could to support the monastery and his

contribution was through his clinical practice. Thus, most of his income was derived from the health insurance carriers of his patients. When patients were without health insurance, he lowered his fee to accommodate them. The computer helped with this also, handling electronic claims and printing paper claim forms for those companies still in the dark ages. Managed care insurance plans were his biggest burden. The paperwork was overwhelming and many times the payment was far from equitable.

The Abbot picked up the ringing telephone that sat on the left side of his desk--very convenient for a lefty. He gazed out of the window above his desk and look beyond the driveway to a little grove of trees across from the Hermitage, and to the barn-like Oratory just to the right of his field of vision.

As he lifted the phone, Francis was hoping that it would not be one of his patients. He gave to them everything he could but didn't have an answering service to screen patient calls, so there were times when they would catch him, even on the day of rest. Certainly if it were an emergency it would not be a problem for the doctor; if it were *not* an emergency such a call triggered mild irritation. Francis tried to work mostly with chronic conditions. He was not in a situation to make regular rounds at the hospital or to be able to drop everything at a moment's notice to deal with an illness.

The monk was too good at multi-tasking. As he was saying "Hello, this is Brother Francis," he was also scanning his desk, piled with work that needed to be done, while his mind assessed ways to do that at the same time.

On the other end of the line he heard a voice bursting with energy exclaiming, "It's Krishna. I'm so glad I got through to you this morning. I was on call last night and had to go out two times to the clinic where people who were very sick awaited me. Anyway, both are stable and I am ready to go back to bed. We don't have a temple nearby so I did a pujah here in my house. I did the prayer service to Ganesh. You know, he's the elephant-headed representation of God who is prayed to in order to remove obstacles. Without sounding disrespectful, I think he's a little like your St. Anthony and finding things."

"Krishna, it's wonderful to hear from you! Maybe St. Anthony found *you* for me. You've been on my mind. How are you doing, my friend?"

Krishna responded, "I'm doing beautifully. My life is like yours--too busy, but happy. But on to more important things. I'm calling because I had an exciting idea. A few of us got together and decided it was time for a great adventure and I am creating one for us--which includes you."

"Interesting you should say that, Krishna. I was just thinking that life has been rather calm for me of late--and thanking God for that with mixed emotions. Underneath I must admit to a little restlessness. As long as this great adventure does not involve dead bodies, kidnapping, being called to the Bishop's office, or anything like that, I may consider it."

Krishna stated very simply in response, "It's time for us to go to Tibet."

"Tibet?" responded the Abbot. "Why in the world would I want to go to Tibet?"

"Why would you want to go to Tibet? Come on Brother Francis. You know very well why *you* would want to go to Tibet. You are an Asian medicine specialist. You are also a bridge between Eastern spirituality and Western spirituality."

"Some might call me more of a 'missing link,' but you're right, Krishna. I do stay deeply rooted in my own Christianity and monastic life, but also find that Eastern approaches deeply enrich me and my relationship with Christ. This is consistent with the teachings of the Church. Also, the Dalai Lama says 'don't put a yak's head on a sheep's body.'"

"You don't need to convince me of your orthodoxy or authenticity, Francis. I don't think you have to convince anyone who *really* knows you about that either."

"Right again, Krishna. I guess it's just an old habit that once in a while creeps back up on me. Most people understand very well what I'm about. You understand the Asian medicine side of my life because of your background as an allopathic physician. You are a traditionally trained Western MD and I am a traditionally trained naturopathic medical doctor specializing in Chinese medicine. You're the one born in India with the dark skin and I'm the one born in the States who sometimes has to act like a vampire so that he doesn't get sunburned. What an interesting combination of East and West in both of us. You're East and West and so am I."

“So, we have an allopath, a naturopath, and we are both psychopaths! I love it when you tell people we are twins, Francis. It always gets a surprised look at first and then a laugh.”

“Speaking of surprises, how in the world would I ever be able to go to Tibet? You’re a little different from me, Krishna. They could drop you anywhere in the world and, one, you’d enjoy it, and two, you would eventually find your way home. You work in clinics, Krishna, for a fraction of what you would get paid in private practice and the good side of that is that you do get some time off. I am in private practice and have to kind of carve out time away from my case load.”

“Francis, you need to do *exactly* that, it’s good for you and good for others. Just because you’re in private practice doesn’t mean you’re earning the big bucks. You give away so much of your services every year. You could be a very comfortable person at this point in your life, but you’re not, especially when considering finances.”

“I’m comfortable enough, Krishna. We all are in this monastery. So many people have so little. My comfort is largely within as you know. You know that very well, my friend, because you’re the same way. One difference between us is that people don’t presume that ‘the Church’ supports you. Sometimes I need to clarify that monks and nuns live buy the work of their hands like everyone else. There is no collection plate. One man from another country actually thought that the government subsidized us!”

“Frustrating I am sure, but don’t let me get off track, Francis. I haven’t had much sleep. The point is, I’ve been talking with our old friends Dave and Chantal. It sounds like their marriage is going very well and that they’re very happy living in north Jersey, commuting to the Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania area. They have some interest in Tibet, mostly because they want to get to understand you, our deceptively simple and complex friend, even better. They say they would consider going to Tibet if you would go.”

“Wow, that involves a lot of time and money, Krishna.”

“I know someone in the travel business; we can book our own flight with the help of the Internet and I think we can do it at a very reasonable price. Besides, you know that you are required by law to attend continuing education courses periodically. Now is your time to do it. Instead of driving to Lancaster, or flying to Chicago, you’ll simply be going to Tibet. What’s the difference?”

“Oh, just thousands of miles and lots of jet lag—little things like that.”

“Come on, Francis, admit it. You know you would love it. Jet lag has never stopped you before. Besides, you have that gadget you wear around your neck. What do you call it--a ‘Chionizer?’ It creates negative ions or something, isn’t that it?”

“That’s right, Krishna, and it cuts my jet lag down by at least half. The owner of the company that sells them says that it helps to clear away stagnant qi.”

“Anyway, Chantal has been plotting and scheming with Flo and Mani about the trip too. They are into it, Francis. What a team we would have--David a detective, Chantal a forensic psychologist, Flo a Cracker Jack nurse, and Mani, who has her own healing energy business. I’m not sure about all of that but I’m sure it’s fascinating. Finally there is me, a Board Certified Family Practice Doc, and you a clinical psychologist, Board Certified in Behavioral Medicine, naturopathic Doc specializing in Chinese medicine, and above all a Christian monk!”

“Just saying all that, Krishna, is probably enough to get us arrested. I mean who would believe that conglomeration of people, backgrounds, interests—not to mention the ‘colorful personalities.’ They’d think we were making it up.”

“Francis, we have been in some horrendous scrapes together and no one ever thought that we were making them up--but a few did wish that they were fairy tales.”

“Well, everything worked out pretty well in our other adventures. You weren’t geographically close by for some of them, but Dave and Chantal and I have gotten a bit of a reputation for sleuthing and healing.”

“Dear Brother Francis, I know what you will say next. You have to take this to Jesus in prayer and see what insight you might get into making such a decision. You have to do Discernment of Spirits to see where this is coming from. Whatever you call it, I reverence it and ask you to do that. Will you at least do that much?”

“You know me like a brother, Krishna. I will do that. I believe that God’s will is manifested not only through the duties of our state in life but also through friends, family, opportunities that arise, and more. I will

definitely consider it. Tibet is a land of mystique and intrigue and you're beginning to whet my appetite a little bit. Why don't you get some sleep now, Krishna?"

"I sure will. Thanks for chatting with me and for being my most unusual friend."

"I am the one who is gifted by our relationship, Krishna. Goodnight and good morning. Bye."

Francis hung up the phone with a smile on his face and turned around in his swivel chair away from his desk. He was now facing the back wall of the Hermitage and in front of him was the computer. With a few keystrokes the computer was dialing the Internet. He had some incoming mail to look at. Actually he receives dozens of e-mails every day, lots of it junk mail, but some of it very interesting and important information.

Oh-oh. Red alert. There's a message from Chantal here. I think they're ganging up on me. He clicked on her electronic message and opened up a post from his old friend from graduate school. She was someone with whom he joined forces on occasion and together helped life situations to resolve themselves, or come to a better conclusion than they might have by individually working on them. In other words, they were a good sleuthing pair.

Some say that he and his friends don't always *solve* mysteries but rather guide them through a process so that they're forced to open up, much the way a flower opens up in a hot house. With a last name like "Fleur," flower in French, what more would one expect of Chantal? Whatever their supposed skill level is, his relationship with Chantal was extremely life giving and balancing for him. He sometimes compared it to the loving friendship of his founders, St. Francis de Sales and St. Jane de Chantal. They loved God first and one another within that context. Although Chantal considered herself a hopeful agnostic, she was raised in a French Canadian family with strong Catholic roots. Her faith, Francis mused, was deeper than she realized.

There she was, yakking on about Tibet in the e-mail. Not only Tibet, Francis read, but there will also be some time in Nepal and Bangkok. *This is getting more and more involved. Maybe I better just pull back right now.* Another part of him, however, said that maybe I do need some time away. Besides, anything I can learn there might be helpful to my patients. I'm also deeply interested in bridging gaps between the great world religions. Perhaps if we revered more of what we hold in common and respect what is different between religions there would not be any more terrorist attacks.

After Francis surfed the net for a while, going into the time warp often associated with that type of concentration, he found that his mind was overflowing with thoughts of Tibet, Nepal, and Bangkok. What lands of mystery and intrigue! What places of ancient spirituality and healing--along with a tremendous amount of suffering.

He remembered that some historians teach that *the* two major experiences with contemporary spirituality are Vatican Council II, which changed the Church more in a few years than it had changed in five hundred years, and the occupation of Tibet by the Communist government. The invasion of Tibet forced millions of Tibetans out of their homes, but along with that exodus came teachings about Tibetan spirituality, culture, and medicine that were disseminated throughout the world. These age-old secrets would never have been dispersed so broadly had not the invasion occurred. Maybe there was some wisdom to this idea of going to the source of that ancient wisdom. Perhaps he might even be able to help one or two people along the way on such a journey.

Francis would certainly be praying over the matter. Perhaps one way to gather more information and see if the idea is any way affirmed by others would be to drive over to the Tibetan Buddhist Learning Center near Washington, New Jersey this afternoon.

Francis often took a hike or went to the Learning Center on a Sunday afternoon as a way to refresh himself. He sometimes felt like staying home and taking a nap, or getting caught up on a little reading, but when he did so he'd wind up at his desk, puttering around with what amounted to work. If he pushed himself to go out, he always came back refreshed and ready to move into another week.

His surfing on the computer was interrupted by the sound of the Oratory bell calling him to Midday Prayer. He logged off and walked over to the Oratory. He sat quietly in his choir stall as the others gathered in silence to consecrate yet another phase of the day to God. As he had done hundreds of thousands of times before, Francis rapped on the wooden wall next to him and everyone stood for the opening verses of this part of the Office.

The first Psalm to be chanted was Psalm 23: "The Lord is my Shepherd, how can I lack anything?" Francis' mind thought about the ways he had been shepherded by so many other people throughout his life and

how God had always remained faithful to him and was not about to desert him now. He wondered if his shepherd would encourage such a major trip at this point in his life.

Midday Prayer is by design the briefest part of the Liturgy of the Hours, taking only about eight to ten minutes to pray. In larger monasteries, the monks or nuns would stop in the fields, the bakery, or the kitchen, and celebrate this brief prayer service and then continue on with their work. In the Salesian Monastery, after this part of the Office is completed, the community members help themselves to a noontime collation, a snack.

Francis bowed to the altar and left the Oratory to eat some peanuts, have a piece of fruit, and get on the road to Washington, New Jersey. He mentioned to the others that they all might want to gather in the evening for a mystery video, a favorite recreation for the community. Having organized things in that way, Francis set out for the Tibetan Buddhist Learning Center.

The trip was the usual forty-five minute journey; the monk listened to audiotapes from a two-year course of studies in Chinese medicinal herbs that he had completed some years prior. This was his third time listening to those tapes and he continued to learn each time he listened. As he passed through the magnificent cleft known as the Delaware Water Gap, Francis began thanking God for the beauty of nature and for his wonderful family, friends, and community.

His mind having been fed with ancient medical information, and his senses having been nourished with the beauty around him, he arrived at the Learning Center in what seemed to be a matter of minutes. A little Tibetan dog, a breed known as Lhasa Apso, greeted him with barking and a wagging of his bushy tail. Francis called the little animal a dust mop and then deigned to give him a little pat on the head before he moved on up to the temple to reverence the beliefs that his friends here held at this place of learning.

The temple had only a very slight scent of dampness but Francis had begun to associate that scent with quiet and prayerfulness. As soon as he entered into that atmosphere he rejoiced in the teachings of Jesus and also the Medicine Buddha--an Asian tradition that celebrates the healing of all people through prayer, meditation, and a balanced diet.

Francis had come here without eating lunch on a few occasions and coveted some of the fruit and peanuts that graced the altar in front of the Buddha placed there as offerings. He certainly would never touch them but it was comical to think of sharing lunch with the Buddha in that way.

Having completed a little period of silence, Francis left the temple, retracing his steps through the outer courtyard, past a splashing fountain, down some steps, and over to a building that the people there referred to as the schoolhouse. He took off his shoes in the foyer of the schoolhouse and ascended a staircase, entering a room with an eight foot by twelve-foot tonka on the far wall in front of him.

This tonka was a large painting on cloth in which was depicted the Tibetan Buddhist lineage through thousands upon thousands of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, moving back in time to prior teachers and enlightened masters. It evoked in Francis' mind times when he had been to Bar / Bat Mitzvahs of children of his friends. The rabbi would take the scriptural Torah scrolls out of the Ark containing the Torah and hand it to a grandparent who would then pass it on to a parent who would then pass it on to the young person. That type of lineage in the Judeo-Christian tradition was also celebrated in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition in its own unique way.

The married couple who runs the Tibetan Buddhist Learning Center are very wise and learned people. They are also very simple and humble. This couple has spent most of their lives at the Center, meeting there in their twenties and now being in their fifties. The Dalai Lama has stayed at the Learning Center on several occasions. The neighbors are very aware of his presence because what is normally a quiet, peaceful road on a mountain becomes flooded with travelers for a few days.

Chapter 3

The co-director of the Tibetan Buddhist Learning Center is a woman named Eve. She told us that she would be giving the class that day because her husband Judd was "chained to his computer" in order to complete a book manuscript. Judd had been working on a translation of a classic Tibetan text for several years and his publisher was putting the pressure on him to complete this project. Judd and Eve, a happily married

couple who worked well together in running the Center, often traded off teaching assignments, sharing their wisdom with the small group of students who would appear on a Sunday afternoon for some Dharma instruction. The class began with the traditional Tibetan prayer prior to study.

Refuge and The Wish

I go for refuge
To the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha
Until I achieve enlightenment.

By the power
Of the goodness that I do
In giving and the rest,

May I reach Buddhahood
For the sake
Of every living being.

Today Eve announced, “It’s always good to review some of the basic tenets of Tibetan Buddhism. This afternoon I would like to go over the Four Noble Truths. Actually, the Four Noble Truths are something that all Buddhists adhere to, not just we *Tibetan* Buddhists.

Eve stood up and went over to the green chalkboard and began writing, her hand banging the chalk forcefully against the board as she wrote out the ancient teaching. Then she pointed to the old wobbly board.

The Four Noble Truths

The fact of suffering /difficulty
The origin of suffering (craving / desire)
The cessation of suffering (detachment)
The eightfold path leading to the cessation of suffering

“To me,” the teacher continued, “these four radical statements sum up a whole philosophy of life. They teach us that suffering is an integral part of living--as if we didn’t know that one! They also suggest that our suffering comes about largely by desire, that is, we cling to what we have or what we want and in that way we cause ourselves pain. The Four Noble Truths provide a way to free us from suffering by suggesting detachment or a letting go and to enter into this more deeply by means of the Eightfold Path. We will discuss the Eightfold Path in detail later. I will write it here for your own reflection in the meanwhile.”

More clicking on the board with chalk was followed by another point of Eve’s hand.

The Noble Eightfold Path

Right speech
Right action
Right livelihood
Right effort
Right awareness
Right concentration
Right thought
Right understanding

“There are those who believe that the Judeo-Christian tradition emphasizes suffering. There are even those who believe that suffering is holy, or somehow something that is to be sought out so that we might earn credits to get us into heaven. For the Buddhist there is plenty of suffering without seeking it out; it is intrinsic to life.

“One may wonder why there is this grappling with the concept of suffering in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. Some of this was spawned by the Buddha’s own upbringing. Does anyone know the story of the person we are talking about? There were certainly other Buddhas before him, more ancient ones.”

A petite woman in her late thirties with long blond hair raised her hand, and after a nod from Eve began to explain her view of the Buddha’s background. The woman was a pediatrician and saw a great deal of suffering, both in children and their loved ones.

The student answered, “About 2,500 years ago there was a man named Siddhartha who was born as a prince in an Indian region of Asia. His father was a king and when the prince was born, a sage prophesied that Siddhartha would be either a great world ruler or a great spiritual leader. The father, who wanted his son to inherit his kingdom, kept Siddhartha from being exposed to any form of suffering, sickness, poverty, or difficulty, so that he would not be attracted to helping those conditions improve through spirituality, and thus be drawn away from inheriting his kingdom.”

The doctor continued in a more animated state now that she had begun telling her story: “One day Siddhartha was taken out of the palace compound in a kind of parade to see things beyond the palace walls because he was very curious and his father thought this might allay his curiosity. Young and healthy people lined the streets; the old and infirm were not allowed to be anywhere in sight, but somewhere along the route Siddhartha did catch a glimpse of an old man in the distance. He was so captivated by this sight that he got out of his coach and chased after the man. The man led him to other sick and elderly people, thus Siddhartha’s illusionary world was dashed.”

A biker with tattoos all over his hairy forearms adjusted his position on a rickety couch and mumbled something about how cool and fascinating this story was.

The pediatrician explained that this glimpse of what the young prince thought of as most challenging, so transformed Siddhartha that he left the palace and took up with a group of ascetics living in the woods and began fasting to an extreme. This lifestyle did not help him find enlightenment, or the meaning of life, or the reason for suffering.

“Siddhartha continued to wander, to meditate, and to struggle to bring some meaning into life,” the doctor said. “Eventually, sitting under a *Bodhi* tree, he experienced enlightenment, a deeper sense of what life is all truly about. “*Bodhi*” actually means enlightenment. He began his teaching career at that point and his followers grew in numbers quite rapidly.”

Eve applauded her student, telling her that the gist of everything she said was accurate and that the deeper challenge of all this was to internalize and understand some of Siddhartha’s teachings. Siddhartha, now the Buddha, the enlightened one, was leading them off to struggle within themselves to understand and grapple with the deeper meaning of life. The Four Noble Truths were simply a way to embrace a kind of courage so that one could move past the illusions we create in life and live peacefully with what is real.

A middle-aged man with an English accent who worked with computers for a living turned his head toward Francis and asked, “Don’t Christians talk about detachment and surrender in some fashion as they try to deal with life and come to terms with the deeper reality of what life means?”

“Yes they do, Colin, but detachment is not the same as apathy, and I don’t think the Buddhist teaching on not clinging is apathy either. The Christian tradition teaches us not to cling to what is fading or what is passing or what is basically only illusion anyway. Christ teaches us to look for what is good and valuable in life, and to move forward with that. So, for example, it means that looks, health, money, what kind of car we drive, are not the substance of life for us. St. Francis de Sales and St. Jane de Chantal, the patrons of our monastery, teach us that we can *enjoy* good things in life but it is not helpful to get addicted or *attached* to them.

“There was some twisted theology going about in the Middle Ages that suggested the more something hurts, the holier we were for enduring it. I don’t subscribe to that, and certainly my spiritual teachers don’t subscribe to that philosophy either. There is enough hurt in the world to go around--we do not need to look for more.”

A teenaged boy with multicolored spiked hair and pierced tongue chimed in, "Yeah, I started to get that message. I used to think that Catholics were so into rules and regulations that there was no room left for *real* spirituality. I used to think that they really didn't care much about relating to another person--the Jesus they followed."

Those in the room who had not been in the presence of Tommy before looked a little startled at the revelation that this young punker had such depth. He continued without noticing, or perhaps not caring about, the shift in the energy of the room. "My oldest sister had a baby recently and I was asked to be the Godfather. I'm not Catholic but the other Godparent had to be Catholic and then it would be kosher, so to speak. Anyway, I went to some classes prior to the baby's Baptism and learned some interesting things.

"Firstly, priests are human. The guy who taught us couldn't have been more down to earth and pleasant.

"Secondly, he said that even though Baptism does wash away sin, a large part of the ceremony has to do with welcoming the child, sometimes an adult, into the Church community. So Baptism is really a welcoming ceremony that is supposed to be fun, not something negative or medieval."

Eve reoriented the conversation to the Buddhist path. "Tommy, that was very insightful and I was happy to hear your comments. I'm wondering about a parallel to that Baptism ceremony in the Buddhist tradition. Can anyone think of something that might be even remotely like a welcoming ceremony or way of incorporating it into Buddhism?"

"I can," said the pediatrician. "I think 'taking refuge' would have some parallels to Christian Baptism or perhaps a Jewish Bar / Bat Mitzvah."

Eve seemed pleased that her students were thinking things through on this level. "Exactly, why don't you continue on Deb, and tell us a little bit about what taking refuge is about."

Deb continued. "Well I have been studying here but I, and some others, have not actually taken refuge in a formal way. I'll give it a try though. When we realize that life is about suffering one way or another, the need for help, support, or for refuge increases within us. That realization motivates us to turn to the 'Three Jewels' of the Buddhist tradition and seek refuge and support there."

"Deb, you're just outstanding in what you're telling us but I want to draw some other people into this so I'll stop you there for a moment and ask if somebody can tell me what the Three Jewels are."

Someone in the back of the room hollered out "the Buddha." Another voice that had not been heard from yet timidly voiced "the Dharma," and a third new voice said "the Sangha."

Eve was now elated. She said, "That's it exactly. The Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. All we need do now is to define each one of those jewels within which we take refuge."

Judd, Eve's husband and co-teacher, walked into the classroom at that point. "I've been listening to you out in the hall folks, and enjoying this class very much." Eve gave Judd a quizzical look. He put his hand up as if to stop any verbal assault and said, "It's done, it's done, I just finished the last page of my translation from the Tibetan."

Everyone broke into applause and Judd, tall and lean, longish brown hair, crashed down into an old chair and breathed a sigh of relief. Eve offered, "Congratulations, I knew you could do it if I pushed you into it." Everyone laughed. Eve continued, "I'm not going to let you hijack my class, darling, but because you're the newest student here today, you've got to tell us the meaning of the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha.

He responded humbly, "I'll give it a try."

"The Buddha is the enlightened one, the one who struggles to lead us to a deeper understanding of life, and who has compassion for all sentient beings. The Dharma is the teaching of the Buddha and also our destiny, our fate; Christians might call this the Will of God. The Sangha is the spiritual community; this is the group of people with whom we unite to strengthen us on our journey towards enlightenment. For example, in this room we are a Sangha, a spiritual community."

Eve smiled and said devilishly, "Very good, Judd. You may stay because you knew the answer."

Hearty laughter broke out within the group and the biker had a strange look in his eye and a slight smile on his face. "I don't know if I'd take that from a biker chick."

Tommy spoke up next. As he spoke, the ring of silver metal through his red tongue clicked against his teeth every now and then. "Eve, you mentioned the Eightfold Path, and wrote it on the board. Can you explain it to us at least a little bit, please?"

“Thanks Tommy, I would like to because I think it is such a practical way of life. Eve stood up and in doing so, was barely as tall as her seated husband. She went over to the green board and underlined the title of the Eightfold Path. As Eve was transitioning to the board, Francis was reflecting.

The Eightfold Path is a little bit like the Beatitudes or the Ten Commandments. It looks like a code of life that helps people to live in a healthy and positive fashion. I have seen so many people leave “organized religion.” Perhaps I prefer disorganized religion. They say that there are too many rules and regulations. Many of the Eastern traditions have far many more rules and regulations but somehow we Westerners don’t see that. Okay, Jesus, I remember you teaching us--judge not and you will not be judged.

The class was rapidly winding down and before he knew it, the group was reciting the prayer that was said at the end of every class. This prayer offers up what has just been done for the good of all sentient beings.

Dedication of the Goodness of a Deed

By the goodness
Of what I have just done
May all beings

Complete the collection
Of merit and wisdom,

And thus gain the two
Ultimate bodies
That merit and wisdom make.

The group began to disperse, saying good-byes and drifting off in various directions. Francis lingered, and asked Judd and Eve if he might take a walk with them because he wanted to run an idea by them. It was a beautiful day, the sky was a luminous blue, and they graciously accepted his invitation.

The trio made their way down the stairs and outside into the welcoming sun and green grassiness that seemed to go on endlessly. They wandered past a *stupa* containing the bones of their founder, *Geshe Wangyal*, affectionately know as “Bakshi.” The *stupa* was about twelve feet tall and six feet square at the base, whitewashed, coming to a point at the top. It had various colorful markings on it, including the painting of the all-seeing eye of the Buddha.

Just beyond the *stupa* was a lake, around which the trio moseyed reflectively. Francis shared with his Buddhist mentors that he had been invited on a trip to the Far East, namely to Tibet, along with having some time in Nepal and Bangkok. He wondered if it was his Dharma for him to go on such a trip. His friends left him with one question in return. “Why in the world not go?”

Chapter 4

The phone beeped softly into the Abbot’s ear as he keyed in the number to the conference calling service. The automated voice, in a pretty female tone announced: “Welcome to the conference calling center. Please tell us your name.” The Abbot answered, “Brother Francis.” In a split second he heard the same mechanical voice announce: “Brother Francis has joined the conference.”

Detective David Gold was the only one on line at that moment. He responded with a cheery, “Hello and welcome my favorite monk! How are you doing today?”

“Very well, David, and getting excited about the possibility of a journey to the Far East. Will Chantal and the others be joining us soon?”

Before the Abbot had quite finished his question the automated voice announced: “Chantal has joined the conference.” David said hello to his wife, who was calling from her office, and Francis seconded the welcome from his office. The electronic assistant next announced that Flo had joined the conference, which

was immediately followed by an announcement about Mani, who had also phoned in. These people were welcomed with the same warmth, as was Krishna, last to join the conference call. (Some say Krishna still goes by IST—Indian Standard Time.)

When all six friends were on their electronic connection, Chantal began to organize the meeting in her soft but decisive voice. “Okay guys, we could go on forever just chatting and enjoying one another’s company but we’ve got some big decisions to make.

“First, are we all into going to the Far East? Secondly, those of us who go need to organize an itinerary. Third, what is the focus of our journey? Fourth and finally, will we have enough time to get this all together so that we can leave in a little over a month from now?”

The group went “round robin” from one person to the next, stating their desires to go on such a journey, especially with such wonderful friends. Everyone was open to the possibility. Some had more reservations than others due to things such as finance and time, but all agreed that if they were able to manage it, they would like to go on this journey.

Chantal next asked the group about the focus of the journey, as well as about possible places that their adventure might take them. Flo, a Registered Nurse of many years and a real veteran in healthcare, responded with her typical energetic enthusiasm.

“All of you folks know that I lost my husband after a long illness just about a year ago and I am wide open for a new adventure. I’ve worked in a hospital setting for over twenty-five years and I am ready to learn some very new and different things about healing and medicine. I have great respect for Western medicine but believe that Eastern healing approaches and ancient wisdom might well be the medicine of the future. I definitely want to meet up with some indigenous healers, and visit whatever type of healthcare institutions exist in the Far East.”

Flo’s energy communicated itself to the quieter person in the group, Krishna, who spoke next. “Having been born and raised until my teens in India, I have been exposed to various Eastern healing practices. As a Western family practice doctor I would like to integrate Eastern and Western medicine, and thus fully support Flo’s enthusiasm about looking into Eastern healthcare.”

“That certainly appeals to me,” said David Gold. He continued, “I have been in law enforcement for almost as long as Flo has been a nurse. Krishna, you are almost young enough to be our son but we certainly see you as a peer and a dear friend. I would like to exercise this mind of mine, which loves to puzzle out mysteries and solve crimes by being in a land filled with intrigue and ancient mystery. I’m particularly captivated by the way the Tibetans manage to live in the midst of an occupied land. They have to be very careful about what they do and say because of the Communist government, yet they have maintained their culture and positive attitude, and that’s a mystery to me. I’m sure they have their struggles as well--as a detective I am immersed in that reality everyday. My Jewish background propels me toward any of the great religions of the world, and Tibetan Buddhism is certainly one of those. So, all of that gets my vote.”

Mani began to read from a long list of places she wanted to go to and things she wanted to see. She had facts and figures from a reputable travel company that specializes in the Far East journeys. Mani’s heart of gold sometimes needed to be tempered by allowing time and space for input from others. Her quick mind and articulate speech could unwittingly run roughshod over the good intentions and ideas of other less assertive people. This group was aware of that and had little problem with relating to her in that context. In her early forties, Mani had founded her own successful company, an organization that promotes energetic healthcare. Every conceivable type of esoteric healing was being practiced by someone in her company, i.e., Reiki, Therapeutic Touch, qigong, various forms of bodywork, and only the God of the world’s great religions knew what else. She loved the southwestern part of the United States and in recent years had relocated there with her family.

“I’m not trying to run the show, gang, but here are some possibilities. We could fly to Nepal for a few days to start. We need to enter Tibet through Nepal anyway. One cannot enter directly through India because of the political situation of—the multitude of Tibetan exiles living in India. That would give us a wonderful opportunity to experience the beauty, culture, and healing traditions of Nepal. Our visas would be processed during those days in Nepal for our later entrance into Tibet. It’s just an hour or so from Kathmandu to Lhasa by plane. The bulk of our travel time could be spent in Tibet, and on our way back it’s very easy to stop in

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