

# **Vigils**

## **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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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 Letitia Seif, my aunt and Godmother, and the first person to take me to church.*

## Chapter 1

LANTAU ISLAND, SOUTH CHINA SEA, ASIA, March, 1998. Did I *really* wake up hours ago to the thunder of drumbeats at 3:30 a.m. this morning? Our call to keep vigil through chant and meditation back in the States is done through a bell, which we consider to be the voice of God calling us to prayer. Drums or bell, the call has always been *loud and clear*.

Life's mysterious events, however, are not always so clear. Openness to letting life unfold and, in a sense, dancing with it, usually resolves most mysteries sooner or later. It is the "later" part that is often the real challenge in life.

Deafening silence now. The sea is just far enough away so that the waves can be heard only with the ear of the heart. Ahhhhh. I am peacefully alone at last. It is so profoundly wonderful to be quiet and to *just be*. My muscles seem to be melting like wax in the warmth of the sun. My ministry keeps me deeply involved with so many fine people and I consider it a great gift. Right now, however, *this* is a great gift!

The guestmaster told me that the entire community of *Chan* Buddhist monks and nuns, the Chinese equivalent of Japanese *Zen* monastics, would be at a community meeting all morning long and that I would be in complete solitude. He seemed to think that I might get lonely or become frightened, but I am far from either. Maybe the guestmaster's concern has something to do with the fact that I am halfway around the world from home. Anyway, we Christian monastics call our community meetings "Chapter." Many Christian monastics do not even know why such gatherings are given that name. My understanding is that it comes from the practice of reading a chapter of the Rule of the monastery at such a communal get together. I wonder what

the Chinese name for their monastic community meeting is. Who cares about that? The point is that I am completely in solitude on this remote Asian island, far away from stress and responsibility.

*Slow down mind.* It's not necessary to think about such little things now. Those *little* musings sometimes fill my entire meditation. When I look at other people who are meditating, they seem so tranquil. So many others have said the same thing about me and to me. At times it is tranquil, but for meditation to be truly *fruitful*, it needs to be turbulent at times also. Saint Francis de Sales encourages us not to base the "success" of our prayer on feelings. Likes and dislikes, in prayer or in anything else, we are encouraged to embrace them all—at least with the higher part of the soul. The lower part of the soul often rebels and that doesn't make us bad, just human.

Even these so called "holy" thoughts can be a distraction or a defense from letting go and letting God in to do whatever God wants to within me. I know that it is not necessary to think about such mundane, or even lofty, things most of the time, especially during meditation. Conserve energy and effort for bigger and more important issues. Sounds like a good resolution to make. May the intense stillness here deepen the imprint of that resolution on my soul so that I can remember it when I return to the States. The barely perceptible breeze kissing my face is beginning to help me slow down within. Wonder what they are talking about at their meeting up there in the monastery common room. *I'm doing it again!* Let the distracting thoughts just drift in and out of your mind like autumn leaves. How many times I've given others that advice.

The early morning orange glow reflecting off the ocean fills the treetops with an iridescent shimmer. The heat is not really oppressive but adds to the wave-like quality of the

atmosphere and helps my runners' muscles become a lot more languid. My spirit begins to melt into God. Gentle dance-like Chinese qigong moves have prepared me for a period of sitting meditation. The small Asian gazebo-type structure, in which I sit in front of the monastery as I look down into the lush green valley below, feels womb-like. I cannot see the hermitages of the monks and nuns but know and sense the presence of the hermits who saturate the forest surrounding the monastery with their powerful energy. It is as if their qi, or life force, and mine have become one. This makes great sense since the Source of all qi, as I view things, is One—God, mediated in Christ. *In the beginning was the Dao.*

My vigil is held in complete silence. The monastic Office of Vigils in a Christian monastery is a liturgical service held in darkness, sometime before the dawn. During Vigils monastics all over the world celebrate the God who is about to break into their day once again, and the God who will come again at the end of time. It invites us to be open, prepared, gently watching and waiting for the Spirit to guide and enlighten us. *There I go again with "holy" thoughts that are keeping me from being quietly present.*

The calls of the large birds soaring above blend in with the brush of God's breath upon my face and arms. My spirit soars with the rest of God's creation. What a wonder to be here. Thank you, Jesus, for my friend, Ignatius. His parents, Mr. and Mrs. Lynn, must have had a premonition about his future vocational choice when then named him Ignatius. He joined the Society of Jesus, often simply called the "Jesuits," which was founded by his patron saint, Ignatius of Loyola.

*Slow down mind.* Let's get back to simply being in the presence of God. No need to think. You do enough of that at other times. *Breathe in; breathe out. Again, breathe in; breathe*

*out.* Sit at Christ's feet as the patrons of our monastery, Saint Francis de Sales and Saint Jane de Chantal suggest that we do. Prayer is simple; stop complicating it. Just listen.

Interesting parallel. I chose the monastic name Francis de Sales after our founder. My friend Ignatius and I have so much in common—the source of our names, our Christian religious vocations, though in different religious orders, and our love of Eastern spirituality. *Just be; just be; just be.*

Peaceful quiet, time and place no longer exist. Lost in the Void. No more thoughts.

AHHHHH!!! The whispered voice was a like clap of thunder. It was as if I were a lightning rod and the words had permeated every cell of my body the way a bolt of electricity making a jagged path through the sky could do.

The figure next to me *thought* more than said: “I want to take you to my hut in the woods.”

I was disoriented. Time had passed, but I didn't know how much time. I don't know why the voice of the short hermit monk with shaved head and gray tunic top and knicker-like pants did not send my physical body soaring right through the roof, but it didn't. The voice seemed to speak more to my *spirit* than to my ears. Oh well I thought, with a bit of the philosophical humor which I often use as a coping mechanism, he will either kill me or it will be fun.

“Thank you very much. I would love to see your hermitage.” *Did they have counterfeit hermits here in Asia?* I hoped not but really didn't care, my spirit of adventure was in gear. In minutes we were in the thick of the glistening green forest. The huge brightly colored stone archway behind us, which marks the entrance to the complex of monastic buildings, was no

longer visible. The ancient symbol of blessing in each top corner of the arch flashed into my mind. I recalled how Hitler twisted that symbol into a curse during the Nazi regime.

I would never find my way out of this maze and back to the monastery without an escort. Where are Hansel and Gretel when you need them? Anybody got any breadcrumbs? *Into your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit.*

*What is that? What is he saying?*

“...You are very involved in healing others. You are growing in your sense of adventure, and you love to do new things. Your world is expanding day by day. You are in our country to visit your friend and do some work for God.”

I missed most of what he had said but caught the latter comments. How did he know these things? We had never met and even the guestmaster knew very little about me. *He must be reading my qi.*

Qi is the life force, which keeps us in existence and sustains all things. It is primarily the qi that is worked with in Chinese medicine, the context or blueprint in which I practice as a medical qigong doctor. Qi radiates from us and can be perceived and understood and interpreted by another, especially after he or she has had training in meditation, Asian medicine, or prayer. This sort of intuitive reading is extremely helpful in the diagnosis and treatment of imbalances. In the West we would call them “disorders” or “illnesses.” The imbalance can be in body, mind, or spirit. Typically all three levels of being are influenced by a relatively larger imbalance in any one area.

The information gleaned from reading qi is not used exclusively to treat imbalances. Many times it helps us to understand ourselves or make positive life choices in harmony with



who we truly are. My mysterious and, hopefully, benign guide appears to be an expert in reading qi!

*Where is this hut anyway, on the next island?* We have been walking about fifteen minutes now. Glad I have my running shoes on. Yesterday helicopters clattered over the forest and landed to pick up the body of an old woman hermit who died in her hermitage after a lifetime of meditation. I wondered then what it looked like down here in the woods and now I was finding out. *Lord please don't let the helicopters come after me today!* The guestmaster became quite anxious when he saw the camera I was innocently carrying as the choppers fluttered above. Of course I would not take pictures of the event. Some cultures think that taking pictures is like stealing a part of the soul of the person being photographed.

Eventually we came upon a little house, more than a hut really, but simple and well kept. It had white plaster walls and was surrounded, actually almost swallowed up, with foliage. We entered through a dark brown door into a simple sitting room with a Buddha straight ahead against the back wall, and a small rectangular window on either side of the approximately four foot high gray statue. Although the sacred image could be viewed as oversized for the room by Western standards, there was still a lot of room to sit and visit in.

The mystery monk offered me a simple bamboo chair with cushions of green. I sat and he then placed a light blanket over my legs. It was slightly cool in the shaded hermitage, probably a chill radiating off of the concrete floor. He seemed to materialize a tea set out of thin air—a rectangular rosewood colored box with a red clay teapot and four small handleless cups on top. Soon the water on the little stove in the next room was boiling and my monastic brother was making green tea for us. It is ironic how green tea can make me feel at home halfway around the

world. The real feeling of “at homeness” comes from being with other monastics. I am rooted in Christ, he and his brothers and sisters in the Buddha, but we share common ground. As a qigong doctor, I know that green tea is not only refreshing, but that it is also used to prevent cancer and to heal from it. We Westerners are beginning to talk about antioxidants and their positive effect upon the immune system, but the Chinese have used green tea to a similar end for 5,000 years and observed its effects, along with the effects of the pharmacopoeia of other medicinal herbs they use.

We spoke of self-cultivation qigong, practice for self-healing and balance, and medical qigong, which is used in treating patients. Moving, breathing, and meditating, in the qigong fashion have helped me to move closer to Christ and have been a part of my personal spiritual life and ministry for many years now.

Slow on the up-take, I finally realized that I was in the presence of a real, honest to Buddha, qigong master! This was my longing in coming to Asia. Some friends were trying to set up a visit to someone on the main island of Hong Kong when I would get back there in a few days. This was spectacular. No one could have planned this. Here I was, on a remote island, in a hermitage with a qigong master. *Hmmm, he looks a little younger than I look.* Many of my teachers have been masters and for them I am deeply grateful. This was somehow different. It was as if Jesus were saying that he is coming to me through this master and thanking me for my faithfulness to him. *Thank you Jesus!* The God of surprises strikes again, and God comes in many forms, often in the person of another. God truly is a God of surprises—if we are open to them, as one retreat director told me many years ago. What a wise and discerning woman she was!

My monastic friend with shaven head made the tea, rinsed the cups with the first pour of the tea, discarded that into a little well in the wooden box-like tray upon which pot and cups rested, and then handed me a freshly poured cup as he made a deep bow from the waist. We sipped the warm and comforting liquid and the aroma wafting from the little cup relaxed me even more. *So far he's not a murderer.* Who cares anyway. How special to be bumped off by a master!

People sometimes ask me if my head is tonsured, shaven the way the early monastics did it as a sign of belonging to God. My host's head is shaven in that fashion. My tonsure is *genetic*—and thus allows for a horseshoe of silvery brown hair around the side and back of my head. It also allows for quick and easy haircuts that I can do by myself.

Teatime was over and we did some qigong on one another. I assessed the Buddhist monk's twelve major meridians, actually the pulses that move through them, and found them to be very open, healthy, and flowing. Acupuncture, and the meridians associated with that healing practice, was “discovered” by the West during the 70s after a member of the press corps of President Nixon's entourage in China took ill. The appendix of the journalist was removed using acupuncture as the anesthesia. That event opened Eastern medicine up to the West. The only downside was that Westerners became rather myopic, equating acupuncture alone with Chinese medicine, and it is so very much more than just that.

Even though most Westerners grew up with only a single pulse being taken by a Western doctor or nurse, many Westerners are beginning to become familiar with acupuncturists taking the twelve pulses on the wrists prior to inserting the hair-like needles into the body of the patient to facilitate the flow of qi in the meridians. Years of study with women and men masters, often

in addition to more formalized schooling with other classmates, and much clinical experience, just begin to impart the subtleties and intricacies of Chinese medicine.

Whether the novice doctor uses Chinese medicinal herbs, *tui na* (Chinese medical massage), acupuncture, or any other modality as a specialty, the mind and spirit of the doctor need to be *imbued* with the blueprint of Chinese medicine. This physical, psychological, and spiritual blueprint is much like the concept of a hologram as taught in the science of physics. Each part of creation, take human DNA as an illustration, contains the whole of the DNA. Continuing with this example, if we change any one part of our DNA, we change the entire structure for better or for worse. A true understanding of this model of health can certainly not occur when a Western doctor takes a weekend crash course in acupuncture, medicinal herbs, or Chinese massage, even if he or she is well trained in another Western healing modality.

Practitioners of medical qigong, unlike acupuncturists, often take the twelve pulses by placing one hand near the organ being diagnosed while the other hand lightly grasps the fingertip or toe associated with that organ meridian. In qigong fashion, I used the fingers and toes for meridian and organ diagnosis. The organs are all paired: heart and small intestine, pericardium and triple burner (the trunk of the body), spleen and stomach, lungs and large intestine, kidneys and bladder, liver and gall bladder. My positive diagnosis of this very special man's body, mind, and spirit balance did not seem to be much of a bulletin to him. Next he gave me a treatment. I sat in a chair in the center of the room. Buddha watched in serene silence. My host started to take off my running shoes and socks. My Chinese medical training taught me to ask or suggest things to a patient prior to any procedure and give the patient lots of privacy. He just did whatever he thought necessary. Another wonder crossed my mind but I realized that I was not

dead yet so maybe this will turn out well also, and began to help the master. He stopped me, telling me very seriously that he must do this.

The master monk began to move his hands around my body at first, then physically massaged my spine and shoulders, and then he pressed on the sole of each of my feet. Just to make some conversation, I mentioned that the name of that spot is called the “Bubbling Spring.”

He quietly said to me: “You know.”

I responded with: “A little.”

The little monk shot back with: “*You are a master.*” *At least I hope that’s what he said!*

## Chapter 2

BELTZVILLE LAKE, POCONO MOUNTAINS, PENNSYLVANIA, Present day. The two rumpled guys in the battered van looked like the characters from the childhood comic strip “Mutt and Jeff.” The driver was tall and thin with lanky limb movements that made every bone in his body appear to jiggle like a Halloween skeleton; the sidekick was short and round looking, like a big wooden top one could wrap a string around and pull on to make him spin. No one seems to remember which character was tall (Mutt) and which one was short (Jeff), but the two of them were definitely a bumbling and laughable combo in the comic strips in the Sunday morning papers--and the same was the case with the present real life duet. Jeff chomped on Cheez Twists and yelled: “Can’t you get this bucket of bolts to go any faster?” One might think that his eating was somehow related to trying to get the car to speed up. The faster he ate, the more he became agitated that the old van merely lumbered along.

“Go faster? I can’t even get it to keep from pulling to the right. One false move and

we're both in a ditch," Mutt replied in the same jaded and negative tone as his partner. The sound of Mutt's voice revealed years of practiced frustration with Jeff. "When we get there we need to creep in *very* quietly, then you put the rag over his mouth and we'll drag him into the back of the van--and put that knife away! We don't plan on murdering him; this is just a kidnapping." Mutt sounded more like an adolescent actor in a high school play than a genuine kidnapper.

"What? Just a kidnapping? You're no fun. Where is your spirit of adventure? There's lots we can do besides snatching him."

Meanwhile, a whisper of light from the setting sun, magnified by the campfire in front of him, silhouetted a lean male figure in his mid-twenties. He sat cross-legged, like an ascetic Buddha figure, the fire danced between him and the water, which lapped in gentle pulses in front of him. The dry wood of the fire snapped, crackled, and popped with a noisy peacefulness. Blotches of white snow dappled the sand around him and the tall brown grass behind him. It was mild for mid-December and his down-filled parka, heavy blue jeans, and hiking boots keep him warm enough, especially now that the fire was roaring hot.

The nightmares had finally stopped. The re-runs of being chased, then trying to strangle the one who chased him were so very dystonic to his gentle person. Screaming in the night had disturbed his very soul. What a blessed relief. Marriage could have been wonderful but Someone had something else in mind. *Let me not run from the love which you offer; Let me not run from the love which you offer; Let me not run from the love which you offer.* Although he was much more of a meditator than he was a person given to vocal prayers, this line from his favorite vocal prayer kept echoing through his healing mind. He prayed the whole "Soul of

Christ<sup>1</sup>” prayer, which was attributed to Saint Ignatius Loyola:

“Jesus, may all that is you flow into me.

May your body and blood be my food and drink.

May your passion and death be my strength and life.

Jesus, with you by my side enough has been given.

May the shelter I seek be the shadow of your cross.

*Let me not run from the love which you offer,*

But hold me safe from the forces of evil.

On each of my dyings shed your light and your love.

Keep calling to me until that day comes,

When, with your saints, I may praise you forever. Amen.”

The silhouette dancing on the ground before him let out a deep and tranquil sigh as he returned to the use of his mantra, or mental tool used in prayer and meditation, over and over again, in rhythm with his breathing. He had finally stopped running and now was more than ready to commit. He longed for it. The fear was gone and he was free at last. The use of a word or line from a prayer repeated over and over had become such a help for him in clearing his mind and in sensing his connection with his Mother / Father in heaven. The young camper had used one line at a time from the Soul of Christ prayer as a mantra day by day for several months now. He had been taught well and was deeply grateful for all that he had been given. Life was indeed good. The God of surprises was in charge. *All is gift.*

Mutt and Jeff slammed their van doors shut and yelled at one another for being too noisy. The pair seemed to blame each other for just about everything that went wrong. Personal responsibility was not the strong suit of either member of this team. Mutt smacked the knife out of Jeff's hand and it landed on the ground with a dull thud.

"Hey, I got that in the Cub Scouts" whined Jeff, regressing to eight years old. "What did you do that for?"

"That was several decades ago, you blockhead," responded his partner in crime. Jeff scrambled around in the dark for the knife like Linus looking for his blanket. When he finally found it, the two crept through the woods toward the campfire, getting slapped in the face, chest, arms, and legs by pine branches along the way. There are those who think that the movie title "Dumb and Dumber" might be a better name for the team than the comic strip Mutt and Jeff! The movie title comment is more a reflection on the members of this odd couple not taking responsibility for their own behaviors, their lack of self-reflection, lack of sensitivity, and has nothing to do with IQ.

The tender noise from the campfire, along with the rhythmic lapping of the water at the lakeside, masked the sounds the two klutzes generated as the crept up behind their contemplative prey. The camper knew that someone was behind him, but something within told him that he was protected, and that this was all part of a larger plan. He was learning to listen well to his intuition. Normally, he would have been a great deal more practical, that is, get out of there, but this time he didn't move an inch. He just kept breathing in and breathing out. It was as if he were breathing all of the stars and the endless sky in and out as he did so. *Let me not run from the love which you offer. Let me not run from the love which you offer.*



Well, the camper didn't run and the next thing he realized was that someone was holding a smelly rag over his mouth and nose. Before long he was somewhere out there, far beyond the stars and the sky, not only spiritually but also in terms of his central nervous system. Shortly thereafter, oblivion set in with darkness deeper than the night. Time and space ceased to exist for the captive.

"Grab his legs," Mutt shouted into the flickering darkness as he struggled with the deadweight of the upper body of their lanky victim whose lean and healthy muscle mass added weight to his body.

"His feet must be size twelve," Jeff distractedly observed, not keeping his mind on the task at hand, taking his time to observe their victim."

"No they're not, mine are about the same size. You just have little tiny feet. You look like a Bobo doll—weighted on the bottom and popping up again when someone pushes you down. Also, I might add, full of hot air. Now grab that Bible, or whatever it is over there near the fire."

Thud, crunch, smack, cut, sting. Bumbling through the foliage, the three set off. Two of them were willing and one was unconscious. They slid the side door of the van open and threw their captive into the vehicle. The old and battered van chugged out onto Beltzville Road again and headed toward Mount Pocahontas. Dense pine trees and even denser darkness surrounded them. Fortunately, although the woods were thick with deer, none ventured across the roads in front of them, an event which causes frequent accidents in the Poconos. The van would probably fall apart on impact from the deer, even a gentle one like Bambi!

"We did it, we did it, we did it," chanted Mutt. Jeff continued eating his Cheez Twists,

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