

Monastic Scribe LV: July 7, 2023

LEARNING FROM MONKS

It is not often that we hear or read praise of monastic values in the secular world of the media, particularly the New York Times. But last month their opinion page included Molly Worthen's piece, "Universities, Meet Monasteries". Molly is a professor of history at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. She talks of a very interesting happening on some college campuses.

The first campus described is that of the University of Pennsylvania. Justin McDaniel, professor of Southeast Asian and religious studies leads a course titled "Living Deliberately". Each week the students are to read about a different monastic tradition and adopt some of its practices. Later in the course they will observe a one-month vow of silence (except for class discussions). They will also have to fast from technology and hand over their phones to him. During this month they are to deal with their other courses in silence and without a computer.

McDaniel also teaches another course called "Existential Despair." Students meet once a week from 5:00 pm to midnight, turn over their phones, and read an assigned novel in this time. Then they stay up late discussing it. The books, such as James Baldwin's "Giovanni's Room" are not meant to inspire. McDaniel says he is not concerned how these 20 year olds feel about the books but how they will deal later in life with issues such as cancer, a parent dying, a child addictive to dope.

By the time of reading this you may wonder whether the man is crazy and that young people won't buy it. On the contrary, there is a long waiting list for students to get into both his classes. These students are both Ivy league students and low income students. They are all hungry for a low-tech, introspective experience. McDaniels has heeded this need for twenty years.

A second scenario that Worthen points out is at San Francisco State University where David Pena-Guzman, a philosophy professor, followed McDaniel's example and began a class called "Reading Experiment". His students also read and discuss a novel that is provocative. These students are mostly first generation working-class college students.

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I find all this amazing and very encouraging. We hear so much of our educational, even college, programs as being watered down. Liberal Arts classes are being discarded. Students don't know how to write, converse, discuss issues. They know how to google facts and do so in the middle of a conversation or at the dinner table. Getting good jobs, particularly in the tech world, overshadows learning to think, discover and go deeper into life and one's human identity.

Worthen's insight is summed up when she says, "We need an intervention: maybe not a vow of silence but a bold move to put the screens, the pings and the creepy humanoid A.I. chatbots in their proper place. They are our tools, not our masters". She advocates that all colleges should offer a low-tech course to college freshmen.

What does this say to the rest of us? These youngsters needed help to break the addiction to phones and computers. The power of culture and peers is often too much to buck. But these experiments seem to indicate that they really know they need and want something deeper. Many of us adults who have come through the technological revolution are not any better. We become addicted to our gadgets. This is as true for modern monks as its for everyone else.

How do we solve problems? How do we work things out? Do we use our minds and hearts or rely on being passively fed like new born infants? I offer a few suggestions. Others may have better solutions. First, in our fast-paced world we need to slow down. In hurrying up we may easily bypass the abundance of resources that could help us. We rush through the same patterns we are used to. We must slow down and face the realities in front of us. Recently a retreatant at our monastery said she could only spare one night away as she is too busy. Will she be too busy when sickness or death finally bring her down?

In our noisy world, noisy both orally and visually, we desperately need times of silence. There is power and spirit in absolute stillness. Just as we need sleep, so we need silence. Neither are negative. This is really counter-cultural. Not only retreatants but monks too have to learn its values.

Finally we need to be in touch with nature, its rhythms, its dynamics as well as its tranquility. How sad when, on a walk in Bare Cove Park or World's End, I pass someone talking on the phone – out loud and oblivious to birds, trees, occasional animals, swaying breezes. As I get older I relish silence and nature more. I thought

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maybe I was betting too old. But the experience of the college students described above tells me that we all need these things. How would you do in one of these college courses? Think about it. Don't busily rush to write though I am here at: joycet@glastonburyabbey.org

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Please note that I do not speak on behalf of Glastonbury Abbey, the Archdiocese of Boston or the Catholic Church, though I hope my faith is in harmony with all these. Any error in judgment should be credited to me and not anyone else.