

## Monastic Scribe LXXXII: December 6, 2024

### LET'S TAKE A BREAK!

We often hear from visitors to the monastery and its environment that they find coming here to be so peaceful, a real break in their busy lives. (Of late we also have an increasing number of dog walkers, both personal and professional). We are glad that they find the monastery a place of peace and leisure. But we monks sometimes wonder why we ourselves don't always experience the same peace and break from activity. It seems that we can also become very busy in just keeping everything going properly, serving guests, putting on liturgies and programs, maintaining the plant, earning our living. Surely these are good things indeed!

As I get older, I recognize I don't have as much energy as I once had. I have had to let go of some things that used to require more attention, or that I thought demanded me to make sure they continued to exist. Looking at myself, as well as my fellow humans, I do wonder whether we want to be busy, need to be busy, to feel good about ourselves. Our consumeristic society pressures us to be busy, to be productive, to acquire more things. Our culture, by its attitude and economic valuation, doesn't have much respect for writers, poets, scholars, and also monks! Education today has as its focus the acquiring of the skills and talents to make money. We reward top executives and celebrities such as movie stars and sports figures. We have become adept at easily finding the facts that have practical knowledge. But do we know how to think, to analyze, observe reality? Are we fully alive?

Most importantly, do we know ourselves, who we really are? Young people, males in particular, are said to be lost, lonesome, searching for the meaning and significance of their lives. Many of us are successful in dealing with our outer lives but lack any real awareness of our inner lives and needs. Self-reflection, self-awareness, self-knowledge all take hard work as we learn to acknowledge our gifts and talents, but also our faults, prejudices, our ways of denial and posturizing.

Good, serious conversation, as well as reading and study are ways to find self-knowledge. But sitting with yourself in silence also helps us to become more aware of what our heart and mind are really saying. One therapist told me that he observes that many of his clients find it difficult to be silent for more than a

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minute. They are jumpy, revved up, used to noise and continual sound. Their hands seem to be attached to their phones, always ready to be in constant communication or find entertainment.

Spiritual writers, both ancient and modern, have spoken of "Sacred Leisure." We have a need, often not recognized, for silence and inner attention. We can see this from a psychological necessity of our human self, but it is also very important for our awareness and openness to God. Psalm 46, verse 10 puts it directly, "Be still and know that I am God." The human inner journey has to discover that both God and self are found in darkness before there is light, in silence before there is speech. Thomas Merton described the inner divine spark that lies deeply within each of us, not directly accessible to us though we may open the way to its epiphany by learning to be still. Merton had a vision, when on a street corner in Louisville, in which he saw every person passing by as shining with that divine spark.

I think we all have moments when we are aware of this inner spark, when we are content to be still. Sitting quietly at a fireplace, captivated by the flames, may be such a moment. Nature, the ocean, trees, mountains, all can entice our inner stillness. Be quiet and pay attention! My inner world is opening up! Parents with little children may find it hard to find quiet times. But do not underestimate the need of children for quiet as well. In years of working at a boys' summer camp, I was often intrigued by seeing a young boy sitting in silence gazing out at the world. I am reminded by the word "gaze" that Richard Rohr uses to describe his prayer by often just gazing and accepting that God gazes at him. What harm we possibly do in keeping them constantly busy, especially in passive attention to television and social media.

Some writers, such as Joan Chittister, strongly believe that we need to resuscitate a weekly "Sabbath." This would be a day each week that one does no unnecessary work, turns off the television and computer and do the perhaps painful work of sitting with oneself. Maybe a full day is too much with which to start. You can always begin with an hour and slowly increase your sacred leisure time. Facing the agitation that arises is an important opening to self-knowledge. Rejecting the guilt about doing nothing may be also a tough, but necessary, challenge.

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I am writing all this not because I consider myself the perfect example of what I am teaching. I too have to fight busy-ness, guilt, tedium, and the agitation that is so much part of our current culture. I have to re-embrace sacred leisure at times. I must choose to put aside noise, distractions and especially seek out beauty. I am sure I could learn from some of you. Do let me know of how you have coped with the challenges that war against sacred leisure. You can write me at [joycet@glastonburyabbey.org](mailto: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.