

ON SOLITUDE IN A COMMUNITY

I am a member of a non-residential, dispersed religious community, the Community of the Gospel. Our few members live far from each other. The meaning of this is that my monastic practice, while supported by others and in consultation with others, is similar to that of a Solitary. There are no bells, no group activities, the Divine Office is read by myself (unless I go to the Cathedral for morning or evening prayers). It is difficult to over-emphasize the sense of aloneness that being part of a dispersed community engenders. Even in my parish, there are few others who appreciate this practice.

Five years ago I had to discern where I would live. I could continue renting in the very upscale, gentrified Old Northside of Indianapolis. The apartment was wonderful in all ways. Or, I could buy a house. As I looked at almost seventy houses up for sale in my price range, the only one that I loved “at first sight” was a lovely 85 year old cottage just off Woodruff Place. “Just off Woodruff Place” meant and still means that I live in the inner city. I guess that I am part of a trickle of gentrification. But my neighbors on Tecumseh Street are not interested in the symphony orchestra, the arts, books, great discussions, wine . . . they are struggling with employment, drugs, single parenthood, crime, health issues. Lots of boarded up houses in this neighborhood. So few people own their own homes that even foreclosure signs don’t exist—this is below the foreclosure threshold. Even though I have lived much of my life in poor areas of the world, I never felt quite as alone as I do in this neighborhood.

Lest this sound like a pitiful boo-hoo lament, let me state that this is not my feeling or intent. I just want to demonstrate that I am by myself a lot. Being alone does not necessarily mean that one embraces solitude. But being alone does at least provide a context where the practice of solitude may thrive.

I imagine my little house on Tecumseh Street as my cell or cave in the urban desert. Each day I awake early, around 5 or 5:30 am. As I slowly sip my coffee, I clear away the layers of sleepiness and I consider the day ahead that God has given me. One more day. The house is very, very still and in this stillness I feel God’s presence intensely. In this stillness, I listen for God’s guidance. If I am not in a hurry to “get on with it,” this guidance emerges. It is about what **to do** (Library? Post office? Bank?) but it is also about what **to be** (forget that slight I received or perceived yesterday, welcome God in the neighbor I don’t like).

As the skies lighten, I move to the candlelit icon corner for the Divine Office. Sometimes I can’t get started and just look into the eyes of the Blessed Virgin—sometimes those eyes look so real and understanding. “Holy Mary, be with me on today’s journey. I am afraid that I can’t cope with the surprises by myself.”

Then the Daily Office. I read it out loud, even though I am alone. If I don’t, I tend to mentally surf it way too fast. And I leave in all of the plural expressions. Sure, Br. Daniel-Chad

is by himself but others are praying the office and somehow I am with them at this moment. So, not alone after all!

Now the intercessions. Also, these prayers are offered out loud. The room slowly fills with names, with sicknesses, with needs, with thanksgivings. How can I remain angry at my bishop for some misguided decision when I have just prayed for her? Did I remember the woman on the Indy Go bus who asked me to pray for her healing? What about the twenty eight year old woman whose leg was amputated last week—her dreams, her hopes, her future? Very soon the cottage on Tecumseh Street fills up with those who need God's touch, including myself.

Today I have to go into town for some chores. I board the bus. After a few stops a woman, about forty or so, boards the bus. She carries a baby—probably not more than three or four months old. The baby is wrapped in a nice blanket and is dressed in a clean button-up-the-legs pajama. But something is wrong with the woman. She looks stoned, eyes glazed, barely aware of the new life in her arms. Even though she is sitting right up front near the bus driver, the driver seems oblivious to this customer. The woman's head falls to one side and she closes her eyes and seems to sleep. The baby is slipping off her lap but at the moment when it is to fall, the woman gathers herself and the infant. It happens again. And again. The woman gets off. When I look back, she is standing still on the median of an incredibly busy street with the baby loosely held, staring into space.

God have mercy. Christ have mercy. God have mercy.

Should I have signaled something wrong to the driver? Called 911? Spoken to the woman? The incident happened so quickly. The minute she leaves the bus, others on it comment. They, too, were stunned. For me, I am left with my prayers: For a life that does not seem destined to a "head start". For a mother or grandmother who seems in the grip of something. All I now have to offer is prayer.

In order to make ends meet, I clean houses. I have done this for ten years as a part time business. The four clients I have, I have had for up to ten years. I like cleaning their houses and my own house. Cleaning well involves noticing. You have to see the dust, the gunk. You have to move steadily and patiently from small task to small task. At the end you can celebrate the concrete difference between the dirt at the beginning and the shine at the end.

For me, cleaning is a monastic practice. Though I am not big on metaphors, I know it can symbolize soul work: *Cleanse me and I shall be white as snow (see Is. 1:18-20).*

I clean only in silence. No radio or television. I ask that no one, not even pets, be in the house. Strangely, sometimes I will spend six hours crouching, lifting, polishing, whitening toilets and sinks, stretching, vacuuming, washing—and when I leave, I feel cleansed and renewed myself! Sometimes as I clean, I repeat in my head the Jesus Prayer.

Back on Tecumseh Street it is evening. The dishes are in the dishwasher. Long day. I am so tired. Now I offer Compline, my favorite office. Then I pray in the New Zealand Book of

Common Prayer: *“Lord, it is night. The night is for stillness. Let us be still in the presence of God. It is night after a long day. What has been done, has been done;/ what has not been done has not been done; let it be. The night is dark. Let our fears of the darkness of the world and of our own lives rest in you. The night is quiet. Let the quietness of your peace enfold us, all dear to us, and all who have no peace. The night heralds the dawn. Let us look expectantly to a new day, new joys, new possibilities. In your name we pray. Amen.”* With Compline, I engage in an abbreviated Examen. This exercise unearths many places where God was present in the day and where I did not see God’s presence at the time. It points me to work I need to do if God gives me another day.

As I go to bed, the police sirens blare. Sometimes the flashing blue and red lights reflect past the blinds into my bedroom. More hurt, more brokenness . . .

I hope that this paper describes the space in which I practice solitude. I don’t always do it “well” and when this happens, I just admit it and try to start over again. In this solitude, I do not feel alone. In this urban desert God is very much present in the yearnings and longings of those who inhabit it. As I learn to be attentive and notice, I see and feel God everywhere. Noticing God in the details or even in the dirty things I clean, keeps me in touch with my own yearning to know God better, to lose myself in Him.

Dividing my property and one of my neighbors is a terrible rusty chain link fence. I hate this fence because it looks so Fifties, so Rust Belt. Yesterday I looked down and alongside this ugly ghetto fixture a bunch of yellow crocuses were in bloom. Flowers in the desert.

God, help me to continue seeing crocuses next to the rust, in the urban desert I live in, in the desert that is my own life. Amen

Br. Daniel-Chad, CTG
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