

## **It Starts with Making a Bed**

Not long ago I had a brief but meaningful conversation with an elderly monk...by elderly I mean ninety-six years old!...about how he's getting along on a daily basis. I see him around often, in excellent shape for his age both physically and mentally. He's lucky to reside in the monastery's infirmary where he's well cared for. Not only that, the staff love him dearly. Possibly I'm attracted to him because he reminds me of a monk who was dear to me and who had passed away around his age. That was some twenty-eight years ago. I was really touched at how lively and "with it" he is, even managing to do little chores here and there which helps pass the time. This impresses everyone, especially the younger monks, for hopefully they will be like him in their old age. The problem, of course, is getting from where these young men are right now to where he is. We'll deal with that towards the end of this brief article.

One day I had to go over the infirmary to check my blood pressure which gave me an excuse to visit this monk. Unfortunately not that many members of the community have contact with the infirmary residents. To be sure, they're missing out on a hellava lot of accumulated wisdom. When we met in the refectory or dining room we both shared the difficulties of getting up in the morning, that is, the usual aches and pains when you get older. I was curious to know how he handled it. Admittedly I was doing a less than noteworthy job and made it known to him. All he did was brush it off not in a dismissive way, but with a pleasant "so what" attitude. His approach? Right away before putting his feet on the ground he slowly makes the sign of the cross aloud but in a soft way. It took him a while to get into the habit, performing this little but significant ritual off and on, even later in the morning if he forgot it. I especially liked his approach, not at all getting hung up if he had forgotten to make the sign of the cross.

The gist of our conversation consisted in how making the sign of the cross helps set the tone for the coming day. Amazing, really, how this short but simple gesture can have such a profound impact. In a subsequent conversation my friend told me he does the same when going to bed as well as before meals. One day while making the sign of the cross he decided to expand it to including various events of the coming day. At first he missed many opportunities of doing it but quickly decided not to get hung up over this. It was yet another manifestation of his indifference, of wanting to be faithful but not worrying about it when he failed. And so for my friend these sacred mini-gestures served to sanctify the various interval times of a given day.

This prompted me to ask another question, but it turned out to be an importune time. I was curious to know how he handled what must seem to be for him one long day after another as is often the case with elderly people. That's a really important question but one that will have to wait. Somehow I knew I'd be in for a pleasant surprise.

Populating a given day with these small, discreet gestures sounds attractive. So why the problem getting started? For my own part I ran into an ill-defined reluctance the first day when I decided to follow through on my friend's example. Even before standing on my feet after waking up I saw the situation quite clearly. Though making the sign of the cross was as easy as pie, some unknown entity sort of made me resist it. Deliberately I say "sort of" because such words reflect my inability to delineate the problem, let alone the source. At least I recognized it and could work from there. This feeling was also bound up with some reluctance, not so much laziness, of not wanting to pause sufficiently long enough to examine why. Overcoming that was more difficult than I had anticipated. At least now I was aware of this situation before moving on to what was first on my list, breakfast.

After watching this dynamism at play for a while, I decided to make my bed before doing anything else. It was a direct intervention with regard to my hesitation and thus put a stop to any dilly-dallying. However, even then I wanted to rush ahead to the next thing. I found that if you don't confront the hesitancy with regard to the first task on your list, might as well forget all the rest. At the end of the day you'll end up with a certain ill-defined malaise without being able to discern how you got it. So the solution consists in being resolved to insert those breaks or intervals represented by making the sign of the cross even if at first it's painful.

The next order of business ties in with the title of this essay. My friend and I abhor starting the day without first making our beds usually after breakfast, sometimes before. An unmade bed is the very definition of unkempt-ness made worse if you have a smallish cell as in a monastery. It makes the whole place looks like it's in complete shambles. My friend is keenly aware of this and complained how difficult it is for him physically to make a bed. Any one of us regardless of age has to use more muscles than we imagine simply by raising and shaking the sheets to conform to the bed. The worst part is reaching over to tuck in the sides. On a side note, this task is a bit easier with those blessed fitted sheets for which my friend is fully aware. Don't forget. A ninety-six year old man is doing this each morning. He could wait to have a staff member of the infirmary make the bed later in the morning. I asked why not

take advantage of this service. The response? He couldn't stand being in his cell for several hours with an unmade bed.

In our recent conversation my elderly friend did not hide so much the pain related to bed making but was commenting upon the restraints his condition. When you get older, time passes more quickly and hence the perception of making one's bed comes around as such. He emphasized that word "comment" which revealed a lot about his attitude about advanced old age. He told me it was part of the gift that came his way when as noted earlier, the difficulty he had making his bed became transformed into a grace filled experience. "Murmuring" was the word he used to define his former attitude, a low grade manner of coping with something undesirable which ultimately is a waste of time.

Then one day my friend woke up, and after deciding to make the sign of the cross in slow motion, he decided enough. Actually he blurted out "enough" with considerable force. He hadn't shared with me how this decision came about nor did I feel it was proper for me to ask. The important thing was that it happened and continued to govern the rest of each day. To be sure, I was lucky enough to be on the receiving end of him thinking aloud. Furthermore, I could see the determination in his eyes and knew something had changed from our previous conversations. Obviously I was all ears, more so than our usual quick morning gatherings for a cup of coffee when I'm the recipient of his little gems of wisdom. A little game we've come to enjoy playing is he asking how I feel in the morning. Initially I had replied with the common "pretty good." As time when on I changed my response to simply "pretty." This evoked a lot of laughter between us both. A brief exchange like that was enough to make my day.

On another occasion perhaps influenced by several recent discussions about making a bed my friend finally revealed how he came to the decision of transforming the daily, inconvenient yet unavoidable chore into a prayer. I didn't ask for any details, being too enthralled by the vibrancy with which he spoke. Key to his decision was looking at the day ahead in a quick flash. It would go along okay but definitely lack something if it weren't begun with prayer. Those are my words. His was a direct, unequivocal "blah." I could tell that he didn't mean uttering anything verbal or even mentally while making the bed. Rather, it was prayer-as-change-of-attitude, a perception of a presence of someone or something mysterious which emerged from the inconvenience of the task at hand. These words "something" and "something" are deliberate. At this stage of the game impersonal or personal lose their

significance though remain helpful. My friend made it a point that he still experienced the pain involved, but as transformed. The decision to make this work had to be made on a daily basis. Such is the nature of spiritual combat as first delineated by the Desert Fathers many aeons ago.

As the days passed and we continued to meet, we didn't speak much about this marvelous transformation. I was keenly aware that at ninety-six my friend might pass away or no longer be able to move about. When you take into account our conversations, some of which have just been recounted, they indeed were small potatoes compared with the suffering going on in the world. That was the initial impression, a normal one but not true. Somehow these gestures had a powerful accumulating effect that ascended the heavens like smoke or better, incense and lessened the pain for someone whom we'll never know. We hear about these things from time to time and accept them but mostly as nice little incidentals. In reality we'll never will be able to give an adequate explanation.

So over the next two weeks I watched my friend each morning with the eyes of a hawk. Don't forget. It's a genuine privilege to be with someone of advanced age who's living a limited but meaningful life. Then I figured it was time to ask how he was doing with regard to our original topic of conversation some weeks ago, bed making. Like most elderly persons, he was delighted that I had taken interest in his life. Actually he was amused that I had brought up the topic which to him now seemed so trivial. The response? Not only did he continue with that chore as a prayer, he expanded it in two ways which he had recently discovered. Like many a Catholic, my friend has a devotion to the Virgin Mary and on one occasion brought her up in a conversation. When I asked his relationship with the Virgin, he responded with great vigor—indeed with considerable force—that she is very much a part of his life. Not only that, when she acts, she acts *decisively*. I put that word in italics to convey the force of his words. They took me by some surprise, for while speaking he continued to look unflinchingly into my eyes.

Another similar example which my friend shared was by saying a prayer while putting on his monastic clothing usually called a habit. Again, he didn't speak of the words he used, if any. I suspect his approach was more being present to God or the like, even for just a moment. I liked his response about this a lot, simple and to the point. Like making a bed, that action involved considerable effort, namely, arms moving this way and that as you slip the garment over your head and adjust accordingly. He did the same when removing the habit before going to bed. Indeed,

this is no small matter for a person of advanced age.

This interaction reminded me of another monk I know, not as old but getting up there in years. For some reason or other he dreads Saturday afternoons and goes into a depression which fortunately doesn't extend into the evening hours. If that were so, the very fact of waiting for each Saturday afternoon to roll around would be close to intolerable. It so happened that this good fellow and I spoke of his dread around the same time I was getting to know my ninety-six year old friend better. Talk about a bonus, two-in-one! I was eager to know how this monk handled that dread which came upon him like clockwork. Fortunately he knows the time when it kicks in...3.30 to 4 in the afternoon...and when it lifts which is around 6pm. As for the time of its lifting, for some years that was problematic because he didn't know if that pernicious grip would let him go even though it never extended its stay.

One day he simply got fed up with being caught in a trap that seemed inescapable. Instead of running away from that particular time on Saturday afternoons he decided to face it head on. How, I asked. Instead of engaging in some activity such as taking a walk or starting a conversation with a friend (this is what I expected him to say), he decided to sit in his monastic cell, basically face the wall, stare at it and wait what would happen. A sure-fire recipe for disaster? Far from it. The expected onrush of anxiety lasted far shorter than expected. For my friend this was a great surprise. Then a whole mess of uncomfortable thoughts flooded in. However, the rush wasn't as bad as anticipated.

What came to his mind was more manageable than anticipated. During all this my friend focused on his breathing, something we hear about by many who practice prayer or meditation. That turned out to be key. More important than quieting anxiety, it turned out to be a weapon to prepare for the next bout of anxiety on the following Saturday afternoon. That time was unavoidable, no doubt about it. However, now being able to locate it and have the means to manage it made a world of difference. In conclusion, he strongly cautioned anyone from trying this, staring at a wall. Always consult a trusted spiritual advisor.

Even though I found my friend's account inspiring, I was left with some remaining concern. Is this what the life of a monk is all about, putting up with a series of rather dreadful experiences? Both his story as well as that of my ninety-six year old friend were, in the words of another friend, worthy of admiration but not imitation. After some time I decided to ask the fellow with the Saturday afternoon syndrome

(as he put it), why? He comes from a large family, many of whom are well off and travel the world. I've met several of them and indeed they are outstanding and practice their religion.

So what's the difference between the two groups beyond the superficialities? People in the world (a common monastic expression) are taken up with families and making a living. Despite the outward show of wealth, even on a more modest level, living as such demands putting in a lot of time and effort. As for the monastic option, it projects a certain outward mystique, but underneath it's as plain as vanilla ice cream. By that I mean the life is as common as it gets. This, however, is deliberate. By keeping life at this level, there's more time available even though monks are bound to saying the Divine Office and work to support themselves. On top of it, monks deliberately opt for a confined way of life summed up in the word enclosure. That's the real distinguishing mark, not being able to move about freely as those in the world.

So this confined way of life—a manifestation of which I just presented through my friend staring at the wall!—has a way of leading you directly to God. This directness sounds attractive and certainly is, very much so. However, the conditions to get there are demanding even though when you look at a monk's life where everything is provided: a place to live, eat, health and dental care plus numerous other benefits people in society have to work hard for. So the question each monk has to ask—and lay people can do the same—is it worth giving up so much to obtain what seems such an ungraspable, hard to define experience of transcendent reality? I prefer to leave it at that, for each person will answer it differently.

Getting back to the similarity between this monk staring at the wall (I like that definition!) and the ninety-six year old infirmary resident, both have one important thing in common despite the different circumstances. They recognize that seeking God takes place within the context of not just little things but with regard to those which are notably commonplace, so much so that for the most part people would never go there, even some monks. As for their view on that means, at a later time I asked their opinion on the matter. Again, both were in solid agreement that it didn't pertain to anything earth-shaking. As another monk put so well, God shies away from drama.

Everyone concurs that undesirable yet necessary things must be confronted on a daily basis. Not only that, a chief characteristic is that they come to an end only with

death or if you become incapacitated. Recognition of this is key, for we seek to escape from them in one way or another even when we recognize that it's impossible to do. Another thing that keeps fear of dealing with recurring negative experiences is to avoid having them pop up in conversation. Most of the time we let them out of the bag unconsciously, in a casual fashion here-and-there, barely noticeable in the course of a given day. An individual case is manageable, but spread a whole bunch of them out over a period of time, and you have a problem.

Okay, that covers the basics from a few recent conversations, mostly short but meaningful. It made me recall a number of similar conversations I have had with a few other monks of the same community both living and deceased. What I like about these observations is that they are concrete...very much so...which to the unacquainted eye can sound outright shocking. Truly they come right out of the horse's mouth as the popular expression goes. Also they remind me of a book I had just read about Flannery O'Connor. She was so deceptively mild and meek looking as well as vulnerable on her crutches, but as wonderfully far out as you can imagine. At the same time she's a conservative Catholic in the best sense of the word.

One interesting topic that caught my attention was pooping. No kidding. This comes from a friend deceased now for some eighteen years so I guess the statute of limitations has expired. While you'd be hard pressed to find this topic tied in with any discussion as prayer, admittedly it's very important. Consider for a moment how good you feel after you've had a poop. You're totally relaxed, having used a complex number of muscles which we usually aren't aware of until after they've been put to work but now are at rest. This couldn't be a better preparation to sit quietly in prayer or the like. I use "or the like" because in the Christian context words such as prayer, meditation and contemplation mean different strokes for different folks. To be sure, they don't fit in with having a good poop as commonly understood. The two monks whom I had mentioned explicitly told me they had difficulty with the terms, not the reality, which was evident by the way they spoke. In light of this, let's say these terms pertain to a quieting of the mind. So all in all a good poop is essential for a good prayer life...not only that but life in general. Anyone who has been constipated knows what this means.

If you look at the **Rule** of St Benedict, he has a lot to say about speaking or better, ways not so much to limit it (a first impression) but how to govern it. In today's world you couldn't find anything more alien, for it sounds like an intrusion into one's personal life as well as harmful for human interaction. At the same time silence

is a commodity which many people long for. Understandable, but when it comes to implementing it, that's a different story.

After having experienced some peace, right away and not long afterwards, unwanted thoughts inevitably assail us, and many feel powerless how to deal with them. At this point you can't help but marvel at their unrelenting persistence and ferocity. This is whole new ball game. Lots of ink has been spilled and continues to be spilled about various ways to handle the problem. Here is not the place to get into that can of worms but simply acknowledge it. The best way? The monk who shared with me his initial difficulty of making a bed came up with another gem of wisdom. He observed that speaking should be a rare event, used as little as possible in preference to silence. For me the way he phrased it from personal experience was spot on.

Judging from the input of the two monks described along with gems from a few more like them, one stands out. In fact, he gave me just about the most accurate definition of happiness I've run across. What gives it special value is that just a few weeks ago he was diagnosed with terminal illness. He counseled that it's best to leave the thinking mind behind. You have to be aware of the fact that this fellow just got news his death was not far off. No specific time was given, but indeed it was certain he wouldn't live much longer. He spoke clearly, slowly and in a matter-of-fact manner reminiscent of Socrates before drinking the hemlock. Two monks in the vicinity of our conversation who were deeply concerned couldn't help but tune into our conversation. Though they didn't get the full gist of it, later on both spontaneously approached me saying how fortunate I had been to get the whole scoop from that fellow. I couldn't help but agree with them further.

The phrase "leaving behind the thinking mind" is both evocative and right to the point. It implies a willful gesture made in a decisive manner or in a word, an irrevocable decision. Again, keep in mind this came from a man in his mid 70s looking straight on at death. In the case at hand we're dealing with something many would consider as extremely precarious and even bordering upon the suicidal. At the same time the phrase holds out the promise for relief, of leaving behind that familiar experience of being led around by every whim and fancy that crosses our path.

Though I haven't consulted my two friends mentioned in this article, I'm fairly certain they are supportive of this position. Besides, they all knew each other quite well. I could pick this up by the way they recounted their experiences, naturally in

storybook fashion while at the same time transcendent. As for use of one's mind, instead of the mistaken belief somehow we have to obliterate it or the like, I got the impression, albeit not stated, that they subscribed to laying it aside. Paradox of paradoxes. That resulted in making their minds keener than the rest of us mere mortals. Don't forget. One of them is in his mid 90s, sharp as a tack. The others are in their upper 70s and are very much with it. The only complaint I heard was short term memory loss which happened from time to time.

What struck me more than anything from my monastic friends is that when talking about prayer or cultivating any relationship with God, it's as concrete as you can get. Not only that, they prefer to locate it in the most mundane situations imaginable. This led to a phrase I concocted recently, vegetable man." Kind of weird insofar as it infers an existence lower than let's say "animal man" (after all we humans are animals). The step below both is "mineral man" or stuff that's completely inanimate. Since we already fall under the category of animal and definitely not mineral, that leaves us with, strange to say, the vegetable option. This shouldn't be confused with being in vegetative state as often applied to a person suffering from total paralysis.

By vegetable I mean paying attention to the most basic (some would add 'vile') aspects of our human nature. When you look at our bodies or any living bodies apart from survival and the desire to propagate, all we do is take in nutrients in order to keep in motion or in a word, remain active. By this I mean doing things that simply keep us alive. Obviously being active is not characteristic of vegetables, but we'll take that one slide. Another term which may be more suitable than the vegetable life is being a robot. That, of course, would upset a lot of people.

Instead of rushing headlong into saying how degrading this is, consider the way we comport ourselves when we freely hand ourselves over to a deterministic way of existence. Talk about being a vegetable (a piece of fruit is just as fine) to the hilt. In brief, we do this by paying as close attention as possible to all our physical movements. Such attention binds us every-which-way physically speaking. The image of a straight-jacket is not off the mark. The first thought that comes to mind is that we're paralyzed, but that would be against our will. When we find ourselves gripped in on every side right away we discover that yes, we are still alive. The most basic functions of being as such continue along just fine. We breathe, blink our eyes, scratch our backs, eat and of course, poop. That's what life is about and setting aside the rational mind as one of my monk friends proposed above.

These most basic functions which we've learned early on to relegate to the background as necessary but generally somewhat bothersome now assume prime importance. Stop and think for a minute about our human condition regardless of race, class or ethnicity. Each of these so-called primitive functions are common to us all. They are present right across any barrier or limit we love to impose. Being directly engaged with them indeed is living. The problem is introducing thoughts which we mistake as where reality and meaning reside. This is so simple that it's close to impossible to comprehend. And if we comprehend it, more often than not we reject it outright surely thinking we're made for better things.

Somehow it's here when being a vegetable person that we come closest to—if I understand correctly—what in the East is called being whole and entire. And to be whole and entire is just that, emphasis upon the verb to be instead of doing. The whole outlook on life, if you will, for each is world's apart yet separated by the narrowest yet deepest valley. That valley is what strangely unites both sides. The problem is we don't take this valley into consideration which represents the almost unbridgeable gap between both sides. So instead of striving after this and that in order to mistakenly “improve” our lives by using our minds, rarely if ever do we go the vegetable route. That in essence means doing nothing except being as deterministic as humanly possible. To be sure, this can be simply too unconventional. Yet how unconventional is eating, pooping and walking, all the stuff that we're born to do and are in the act of doing all the time? For most of us attention instead is upon the incredibly complex mental apparatus we impose on these natural functions.

So when we focus upon our vegetable life we are home. It's a home that requires most of us to leave for an extended period of time but one to which we long to return. I have to qualify that to a certain degree. While this longing has a lot to say about human existence, many of us get lost on the way, actually too many. I leave it at that, for to expand further is well beyond my pay grade. All the somewhat gimmicky words and phrases we hear tied in with the East about not going anywhere nor doing anything turn out to be true. However, by focusing on those expressions we can turn out to be just as saddled by thoughts and emotions and anyone else. Admittedly it takes a long time to come to this simplest of all conclusions. Nevertheless, it's worth the wait until it dawns on our thick skulls.