

I Brake for Monks: A New Monasticism for Progressives

Rev. David Hottinger
White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church
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First Reading (by the English mystic and activist, Andrew Harvey)

The reason I still have hope, as I approach my sixtieth birthday, is not because I believe the human race is going to find a technological, political, or economic solution to this devastation. I do not believe in the potential transformation of the existing corporate nightmare; I do not believe in the magic of technology; I do not believe in the ability of a corrupt and greedy political class to deconstruct its own power. I do not believe in the spiritual depth and sincerity of the great majority of religious and New Age leaders, or in their capacity either to tell the truth about what is happening or to galvanize human beings to react urgently and wisely to it.

Our inherited notions of salvation, redemption, and enlightenment are as dissociated and ineffectual in this immense evolutionary storm as our continuing tragic obsession with perpetual growth and technological wizardry. Nothing undertaken from our current level of consciousness will now work. This crisis is the destined graveyard of all human “isms”: all religious, political, and economic agendas, fantasies, and projects. The grandiose mask we have constructed for ourselves out of our demented narcissism is being stripped from our faces to reveal us as we are—terrified, lost, and helpless before a global agony of our own making.

The hope I live for and explore in all my work and teachings has nothing to do, then, with the current smorgasbord of fantasies for sale in the corporate bazaar. My hope is grounded in three interlinked truths, derived from a lifetime of mystical and personal search. These truths are: first, that the human race is now in an unprecedented and destined evolutionary crisis—a global dark night. Second, that this global dark night is potentially the birth canal for a new, embodied divine humanity chastened by tragedy and illumined by grace. Third, that the birthing force of the divine human is the force of the Motherhood of God, expressed not only in a new and radically evolutionary mysticism, but also in sacredly inspired, radical action on every level and in every arena.

Second Reading (by Adam Bucko and Rory McIntee)

In the end, it is the dedication to an engaged, contemplative life and a life of intelligent service to all beings that makes one a new monastic. The new monk seems to be tasked with the impossible: to build nothing less than the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth. She cannot just tear down the old society. She is pledged to build it not just for herself, but for everyone, especially for those who find themselves on the bottom rung of our society the poor and oppressed, the mentally afflicted and sexually abused—"the salt of the earth."

Yet her compassion does not stop there. With her keen eye, the new monk sees the desperation in the faces of Wall Street and the loneliness and despair of the souls of so many of the rich and privileged, and she works for them as well. The religious fanatics, who have so twisted the spirit and message of love of their founders, also fall within the breadth of her compassion.

The new monk is to build this new world not by violence, but through the force of her compassion, her prophetic voice, her wisdom and love—and through the mobilization of all those who will stand with her. That is the work of the new monastic, to incarnate a new world that will allow for the unique flowering of the Spirit in every individual and community on Earth.

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Alistair McIntyre, the contrarian and brilliant British philosopher, ended his influential study of contemporary Western ethics and philosophy with this observation:

What matters at this stage is the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the dark ages which are already upon us. ... This time, however, the barbarians are not waiting beyond the frontiers; they have already been among us for quite some time. And it is our lack of consciousness of this that constitutes part of our predicament. We are waiting not for Godot, but for another—doubtless very different—St. Benedict. (After Virtue)

Who in the world is St. Benedict and whatever could McIntyre mean that we are in need of a very different version of him now?

Benedict of Nursia is considered the symbolic founder of western Monasticism, a movement characterized by groups of monks (men or women) living together in community under a common rule of life a rule based on disciplined patterns of prayer, work, and service. Benedict, whose life spanned from 480-523 of the Common Era lived in deeply troubled times. The Roman Empire, which had kept order in the West – however violently – for 1500 years, was in ruins. During its final death throes, the Western Empire saw egregious abuses of power, economic turmoil, political instability, invasions, and rampant corruption. In 410, just 70 years before Benedict’s birth, Rome was sacked the Visigoths and then again in 455 by the Vandals.

Benedict was Born in Nursia, a village in the mountains northwest of Rome. He went to Rome as a teenager for classical studies, but became shocked by the moral chaos and disorder he witnessed there. Benedict retreated to some caves near the village of Subiaco, about 40 miles east of Rome where he lived as a hermit, devoting himself to prayer.

This wasn’t entirely unique in the 5th century. Since the 3rd century, a steady trickle of young people in the Christian East and West had been flowing from the morally-bankrupt Imperial centers into the wilderness to seek God, often in quite austere conditions. They were called monks from the Greek word “monachos” – “single,” “solitary.” Monks were single-hearted in their passion for God, over and against the things of this distracting, transitory world. By and large, hermits lived in solitude, though sometimes they formed small communities called monasteries.

About three into his solitary life, Benedict got recruited by a group of nearby monks to be their leader – or Abbott. Apparently the monks were impressed by Benedict’s zeal for God, his holiness. Well, perhaps that zeal got too much for them, and the monks tried to poison Benedict. After escaping, Benedict left Subiaco and went to an area south of Rome, eventually establishing 12 new communities including the the large mountainside monastery called Monte Cassino.

What made Benedict unique in the monastic movement was his emphasis on being in community. It was at Monte Cassino that Benedict wrote a document that has had an enormous impact on the shape of Christian spirituality in the West. With a Prologue and 73 chapters, the Rule of Benedict is less a legal code than a series of reflections about how to organize a group of spiritual seekers as they share a common life dedicated to prayer, learning, and service. The Rule contains basic teachings about the

monastic virtues of silence, obedience, and humility and lots of practical advice about eating, caring for the sick, welcoming guests, and traveling. Succinctly, the Rule sets forth a patterned life of prayer, work, and rest for a community of God-seekers.

Benedict styled this way of life a “school for the Lord’s service.” In the twilight of Imperial Rome, these monastic communities were profoundly counter-cultural. With its emphasis on humility, listening, peace, prayer, community, and hospitality Benedictine monasticism challenged the underlying assumptions of a crumbling political and economic order – one marked by violence, chaos, and brutality...Benedict’s Rule, this “school for the Lord’s service,” took off like wildfire. Some would say it sparked a revolution.

Within decades of Benedict’s death, every city in Italy had a community of monks organized by the Rule. Benedictine monasteries became towering forces in the religious and cultural landscape of Europe. In the words of Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, a contemporary practitioner of Benedictine spirituality in Durham, North Carolina, the wisdom found in Benedict’s Rule

has guided communities that have produced a disproportionate number of saints and created seedbeds for democracy and abolition, education and hospitals. Throughout the Middle Ages, Benedictine communities gave birth to the schools where people learned to imagine a new society within the shell of the old. They were training centers for clergy and scholars; centers for the preservation of ancient manuscripts, havens for the arts, sources for spiritual direction; and houses of hospitality for those in need. These communities became literal schools of the world-to-come. But for Benedict in the 6th century, the Rule could only have been an honest attempt to say in the present what a tradition of radical commitment to the gospel offered people who wanted to shape a life together (Wilson-Hartgrove, The Rule of Saint Benedict: A Contemporary Paraphrase).

Like Alistair McIntyre, Wilson-Hartgrove asks whether our time is ripe for the unfolding of a new movement for transforming the world out of the ashes of another dying, albeit different, Empire.

At the beginning of the 21st century, when almost every sign points to the fact that we are, all of us, in the midst of great social and cultural transition, many people are experimenting with new forms of life together, trying to imagine what the future will hold for them and for the human community. Our existing educational institutions can serve well to train people in a way of life that has worked for generations. But a growing number of people, young and older, sense that this way of life leads them to a dead end. We need spaces to imagine new possibilities, places to remember that another world is possible. We’re thirsty for the good news, a new heaven and a new earth...We need a school for a new way of life (Wilson-Hartgrove, Rule of St. Benedict).

And he is not alone. Some very intriguing progressive people of faith are calling for the development of a “New Monasticism” as a means of resisting and ultimately transforming the “new dark ages” now upon us.

Among them are the late English Benedictine monk Bede Griffiths who spent the last 40 years of his life on a Hindu-Christian ashram in India; Brother Wayne Teasdale who pioneered the emerging Inter-spirituality movement, feminist mystic and theologian Beverly Lanzetta; Sri Lankan monk-philosopher

Raymond Panikkar; Pir Zia Inayat-Khan of the Sufi Order International; Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, one of the founders of the Jewish Renewal Movement; Joanna Macy, a proponent of Engaged Buddhism; Episcopal priest Matthew Fox – who was a Catholic theologian before his Dominican Order expelled him; spiritual writer Mirabai Starr; Fr. Thomas Keating, a leader in the Centering Prayer movement; and Benedictine Sister Joan Chittister.

The new monastics begin with a clear-eyed view of the spiritual, ecological, political, and cultural twilight into which we are now descending.. They place little faith in the ability of the powerful to reverse course, in technological quick fixes to save the day, or in political tinkering to plug the gaping wounds of a system obsessed with the single-minded pursuit of wealth and pleasure. Likewise, new monastics do not believe that the old forms of institutional religion – with their divisions and proclivities for self-righteousness and self-preservation – will inspire the kind of spiritual transformation we need to wake up and change our death-dealing ways.

Realists – yes; pessimists – no. The call to a new monasticism is a profoundly hopeful one. As Beverly Lanzetta puts it,

The new monastic way of life aspires to live each day honoring the sacred, ...
...recognizing the holiness of existence, striving to be love on earth, and opening one's heart to the sorrow and the glory that is our world. It is a life vowed to uphold in thought, word, and deed the precious gift of life created in the divine image, and to honor and to take responsibility for the dignity of the earth, cosmos, and all sentient beings (<http://beverlylanzetta.net/>)

And listen to this summons by Mirabai Starr. New monasticism

is a ferocious devotion to Love itself. If you are this fierce, tender, curious, broken-open kind of being, you are probably a new monastic. : you are as dedicated to the well-being of all creation as you are to your own awakening. the distinction between action and contemplation is a nonissue for you... Every act, each thought, all efforts are divinized and blessed when dedicated to the Holy One. You see the face of the Divine in the poorest of the poor and at the heart of your own most vulnerable moments.

A new monastic may not even believe in a personified deity. You may bristle at God-language and resist ritual. Nevertheless you drop to your knees in awe of the beauty of the natural world, and you experience the suffering of children in war zones faraway as if your own body was being poisoned. A two-minute conversation in line at the hardware store opens your heart and changes you forever. You catch glimpses of the perfect order of the cosmos while serving soup, brushing your lover's hair, bearing quiet witness to a friend who is grieving. You are in love with the Great Mystery itself (Preface, The New Monasticism: An Interspiritual Manifesto for Contemplative Living by Adam Bucko and Rory McEntee)

On Friday night, one of my one of my children, knowing that I rarely have the opportunity to stand behind a pulpit, asked me what I was going to preach about this Sunday. I began with with a rather intellectual and abstract explanation of monasticism, old and new – and watched her eyes begin to glaze over.

Then I blurted out: 1500 years ago, as the world seemed to be falling apart, a guy named Benedict helped found a movement that helped people to put God first and to live together in peace. That movement – called monasticism - changed the world. The world as we know it also seems to be falling apart – maybe even more catastrophically this time around. But all over the globe there are emerging communities of people who are finding ways to resist the devastation and to imagine new ways of living together in peace. Some of these communities are calling themselves new monastics. She said, “hmm...” and walked away.

Yesterday afternoon, as we were leaving the Pride Festival my son pointed to a bumper sticker on a parked car which read, “I brake for monks.” The daughter from the night before exclaimed, “Dad, There’s your sermon!”

“I brake for monks.” Like most of you, my daily world is light years away from a tranquil cloister, walled off from the hustle and bustle of life in the American Empire. I have a blended family of 6 children – 4 of them teenagers – nothing tranquil about that! I have a mortgage and more consumer debt than I would like. I am beholden to certain creature comforts, especially good food at fine restaurants and leisurely travel. I love my Kindle and iPad Pro and am hard pressed to imagine a day without e-mail. I have struggled with addiction and would not describe my personality using any of the monastic virtues of humility, patience, or obedience.

I manage a team of 15 chaplains in an urban Level One Trauma Center and the region’s busiest safety net hospitals. Through our doors come people afflicted with every imaginable kind of suffering: racism and racial disparities, addiction, mental illness, domestic abuse, historical trauma, sexual abuse and exploitation, violent assault, accidental injury, police violence, mass incarceration, lack of access to health care, political terror and torture in their countries of origin, vulnerability now due immigration status. Some days, that stream of human misery seems endless.

Yes, there is some part of me that longs to escape the chaos and confusion and stress swirling inside and around me. I think that escape response is probably hard wired into all of us. Some of us numb out through working harder, having that extra drink, popping a pill, buying a bigger house, intellectualizing away all that seems bothersome, searching for the perfect outfit, getting lost in social media, or exercising till we drop. That stream of distraction is endless too...

A few of us take the route of what Robert Masters Johnson calls “spiritual bypassing” – using spiritual practices or beliefs to hide from the world’s pain in “la-la” lands of denial and bliss. Perhaps that is why some aspects of the older monasticism – fleeing from the world and its temptations – still appeals to me (though the monks I have known have assured me that living in a monastic community is no cake walk; there is no such thing as “fleeing the world” when we have ourselves – chattering mind, restless heart, and emotional baggage and all – along for the ride).

But what if there is way to BE IN the world without numbing out or denying its pain? To stay connected to the sources of life and hope and love even while having our hearts broken by the suffering we witness? To imagine a new heaven and a new earth, even as we grope amidst the ruins of the old order crumbling before our very eyes? What if we all started braking for monks?

The new monasticism calls not for escaping from or abandoning the world but transforming it through the conversion of our hearts, the healing of our souls, and the re-ordering of our communities. According to the new monasticism, this transformation requires us to attend to three realities:

1. Every human being has a spiritual life. We are part of a much greater web of life and love ; to cut ourselves off from sources of meaning and joy and purpose and connection is to die. The English spiritual provocateur, Andrew Harvey, frames it starkly: “We are so addicted, either to materialism or to transcending material reality, that we don’t see God right in front of us, in the beggar, the starving child, the brokenhearted woman; in our friend; in the cat; in the flea. We miss it, and in missing it, we allow the world to be destroyed.”

2. The spiritual life comes alive when it is nurtured in community. Many tools exist to awaken us to what is most alive in ourselves and sacred in the universe. New monastics remind us that we can utilize any number of spiritual practices and disciplines to connect with the Divine and allow ourselves to be healed and transformed from the inside out.

Some of these practices can be gleaned from the older monasticism and traditional religious sources while others are emerging from recent developments in neuroscience and transpersonal psychology. New monasticism encourages us to adopt a spiritual practice that fits our unique personalities and circumstances. Examples include contemplative prayer, mindfulness meditation, sacred breathing, yoga, walking meditation, chanting, silence, lectio divina, retreats, spiritual direction, energy work, music, writing, creating art, drumming, communing with nature, shadow work, psychotherapy, spiritual friendship and spiritual listening in community (as I got to experience myself here at WBUUC in the Wellspring Program).

3) Contemplation and action are inextricably joined in the path of sacred activism. For the new monastic, there is no divide between the sacred and the secular, the cloister and the world. ALL that exists is holy – hence there is no turning away from suffering, injustice and pain. New monastics are passionately committed to *tikkun olam* – the healing and the repair of the world – precisely because it is IN the cracks and crevices of everyday life that they meet the Divine most intimately. Andrew Harvey has coined the term “sacred activism” as a way of describing this essential joining of spirituality and activism:

spirituality that is only private and self-absorbed, one devoid of an authentic political and social consciousness, does little to halt the suicidal juggernaut of history. On the other hand, an activism that is not purified by profound spiritual and psychological self-awareness and rooted in divine truth, wisdom, and compassion will only perpetuate the problem it is trying to solve, however righteous its intentions.

When, however, the deepest and most grounded spiritual vision is married to a practical and pragmatic drive to transform all existing political, economic, and social institutions, a holy force—the power of wisdom and love in action—is born (Andrew Harvey, [The Hope: A Guide to Sacred Activism](#))

Brother Wayne Teasdale sums it all up beautifully:

Each one of us is a mystic; a monk dwells in each of our depths, just below our everyday awareness. For me, the mystical path means awakening this monk within and nurturing its development in encountering the world.

This path is reinforced by spiritual practice, with its breakthroughs and graces; supported by like-minded friends, with their love and challenges; empowered by thoughtful navigations through the limitations of time, work, and money.

It means living with compassion and love in the concreteness of daily encounters, especially with the most vulnerable. It means taking risks for the sake of justice, which requires us to speak the truth boldly, clearly, and firmly to power in all its forms, especially the political, economic, and religious (Wayne Teasdale, A Monk in the World)

This is the path of the new monasticism. This is why I brake for monks and invite you to do as well. I would like to close by sharing nine vows of the New Monastic way of life. They were created by Adam Bucko and Rory McEntee who credit many teachers as their source of inspiration.

After I recite the vows, we will have a moment of silence together. Let us reflect on what the new monasticism might be saying us as individuals and what it might mean for our life together in this time, in this place, in the twilight of another Empire's ruins... Let us begin braking for monks...

1. I vow to actualize and live according to my full moral and ethical capacity.
2. I vow to live in solidarity with the cosmos and all living beings.
3. I vow to live in deep nonviolence.
4. I vow to live in humility and to remember the many teachers and guides who assisted me on my spiritual path.
5. I vow to embrace a daily spiritual practice.
6. I vow to cultivate mature self-knowledge.
7. I vow to live a life of simplicity.
8. I vow to live a life of selfless service and compassionate action.
9. I vow to be a prophetic voice as I work for justice, compassion, and world transformation.

- from The New Monasticism: An Interspiritual Manifesto for Contemplative Living by Adam Bucko and Rory McEntee
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For more, see:

New Monasticism Manifesto at

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