

# **DAYTIME PRAYER**

**from the Office of the Dead**

Brother / Doctor Bernard Seif, SMC, EdD, NMD

Also by Brother Bernard Seif and a part of this series:

(2001). *Office of the Dead*. Lincoln, NE: Writers Club Press / iUniverse.com.

(2002). *VIGILS from the Office of the Dead*. Lincoln, NE: Writers Club Press / iUniverse.com.

(2004). *MORNING PRAYER from the Office of the Dead*. Martinsville, IN: Bookman Publishing & Marketing.

This book is a work of fiction, based on seminal ideas drawn from the life of the author. The characters and situations in this monastic mystery are the product of the author's creative imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any medical or psychological information provided herein is a part of this fictional work and is not presented as a form of diagnosis or treatment.

To Jean and Don, my dear sister and brother-in-law, who make me think of holidays,  
because I have celebrated so many in their very welcoming home.

## CHAPTER 1

“He has a red turban on and his breath reeks of alcohol. Large brown eyes with red streaks in the whites are staring at me as he speaks. A rifle is slung casually over his right shoulder. Everyone on the train is standing transfixed during our interaction. A baby is crying as we hurtle through the darkness of the Indian countryside. It’s like a bizarre portrait frozen in time.”

Vincent was hyperventilating. His heart rate and blood pressure were clearly elevated. Doctor Fleur was sorely tempted to call a halt to the session but her fine mind speedily processed the risk-benefit ratio for this patient and made a professional decision to continue the clinical hypnosis therapy session.

“You are safe, Vincent. Just keep looking at the split screen in your mind and tell me what is happening now. Remember, a part of you is experiencing this as reality, and another part of you is observing it.”

“I can’t understand what he is saying. The brown man in the military uniform is speaking in English, I believe, but he is so drunk and his words are so heavily accented that it is almost impossible to comprehend his speech. I know that he wants to know where I am going. I tell him Dharmasala, North India. It doesn’t matter to him; I think he wants something more from me but I don’t know what.”

The clinical and forensic psychologist pushed her short dark hair back behind her dainty ears and spoke some calming words: “Very nice. Take a few deep breaths and continue, if you will.”

The thirty-something man on the black leather recliner shook visibly. His olive skin was tinged with pink but he appeared to want to continue speaking. “Ravi is trying to translate but can barely understand this menacing person either. Though both speak Hindi, the soldier has a different accent from Ravi.”

Chantal knew that her next patient was in the waiting room but that there was still some time left to spend with Vincent. She invited him deeper into the trance.

“We are going to dissolve the split screen in your mind now, Vincent. When I count to three, you will begin experiencing the events in the present moment—fully and completely. Is that understood?”

The patient responded with a weak inaudible grunt.

“Very fine. Three... Two... One. What is happening to you now Vincent?”

“The man in the red turban is taking Ravi to another train car. Babies are crying. People are staring. Everyone is afraid to move. The military man has a rifle slung over his shoulder and I’m afraid that if I move he will use it.

“I’m following them at a distance. They stop in the next car, almost falling down as the train wavers, then stand there talking. The guard took Ravi’s wallet and passport earlier. I could see him trying to read the passport but it was upside down. He looked at all of Ravi’s cash in his wallet.

“Why would the guard demand a green card from Ravi? Ravi is an American citizen. Wait. Look. He’s giving Ravi his personal belongings back. I think it’s a shakedown. The man wants a payoff but Ravi has nothing to hide. Ravi is an American citizen and doesn’t need any special papers to travel by train. My friend is slowly walking away and back to our car now.”

“You are doing very well, Vincent. Just keep going.”

“I am terrified. What if the guard uses his rifle? ‘Get back here,’ he is yelling. Ravi just keeps walking as if he does not hear the man in the red turban.

“My friend is passing by me now and whispering: ‘Let’s get back to our car. Just walk slowly like me and I think we will be fine.’ We are walking back now and hoping that the guard is not following us. Everyone is watching in tense silence making the roar of the train deafening. Ravi and I go to our metal bunks for the night. That was the longest few minutes of my life. I don’t think we will get much sleep.”

“When I count from three to one you will awaken, feeling refreshed and better than when we started. You will remember everything and may find that more and more of your memories return gradually over the next few weeks, perhaps during the day, perhaps in dreams.”

The doctor continued soothingly and confidently: “Three, two, and one. Awake and refreshed.”

Vincent opened his squinting eyes and blinked several times, rubbed his eyes, and mopped sweat from his brow with a handkerchief. The underarms of his shirt were ringed with dampness.

“How are you feeling, Vincent?”

“A little shaken, Doctor Fleur. I think I’d rather be at the dentist. I never thought I would prefer root canal to anything else!”

“Hypnotherapy can feel a *little* like pulling teeth sometimes, I know, but you will be glad you had the courage to do this. ‘Refreshing’ old memories, as we call it, can be very unsettling, but it will help us to piece together the missing pieces in your mind.

“Your memory is like a tape recording or a CD, but there are blank spaces in yours and we need to find out what they are and why they were put there.

“Do you have any conscious recollection of a military guard on a train wearing a red turban and carrying a rifle, Vincent?”

“Not before today Doctor, but now that I’ve been through this session, there is something vaguely familiar about that story. And I do remember what went on under hypnosis. You said that is okay, right?”

“Yes, okay, and very normal. We usually do remember what happens in hypnosis. It is only when the memory unearthed is still too traumatic for our conscious mind to deal with that we experience spontaneous amnesia to the hypnosis session. The fact that you remember what happened is a good sign, Vincent.

“Please practice the self hypnosis technique I taught you a few weeks back—the one where you roll your eyes upward while closing your eyelids, remember?”

“Yes Doctor, I do remember it and have been practicing it. Didn’t you say that doing things in two directions at one time, like rolling the eyes upward while lowering the lids helps to confuse the brain?”

“Right. Hypnosis taps our inner mind by circumventing the rigid and logical patterns we usually think with. Under many circumstances, logic is helpful and efficient, but sometimes it can get in the way of accessing what is repressed. When we do something confusional, it breaks the logic barrier, so to speak.

“There is an ancient Asian saying: ‘Confusion precedes enlightenment.’”

“Well, I’m going to be one very enlightened person then, because now I am one very confused guy.”

The doctor gently kept herself on track. “Speaking of memory, I now need to remember that someone is waiting for me in the reception area. Let’s meet again next week, shall we?”

“A part of me says yes and a part of me says no. Another good sign?”

“You’ll have my job soon, Vincent. See you next time.”

## CHAPTER 2

Noontime on Saturday in a monastery. The morning is spent cleaning, perhaps some of the afternoon too if need be. The break for prayer and lunch is appreciated by all. Daytime Prayer from the Liturgy of the Hours, the Divine Office, is the shortest of the five communal prayer services which punctuate the various phases of the day and night in a monastic community.

Anthony, beginning his one-month Observership in the small household of monks and nuns, listened devoutly to the final prayer of this ten-minute service:

Let us Pray: Another week has passed, life-giving God, and we celebrate all that we have done well and reflect on what we might have done differently. We offer this all to you. Bless what is good and heal what needs wholeness. Animate us to do your loving will with creativity and generosity in the week to come. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.

The bouquet of flowers in front of the square pine wood altar was just about out of blossoms and the bright colors had muted into a more washed-out version. Liturgically, Sunday begins at Evening Prayer / Vespers, and a fresh bunch of flowers will be picked to replace these dying embers this afternoon. After a final bit of cleaning the small house of prayer would be ready. A whole new week begins at Saturday Evening Prayer in a monastery—everything clean and fresh in preparation for the Sunday solemnity.

The *Angelus*, a brief private devotional set of prayers commemorating the miracle of Jesus becoming flesh, was recited quietly by each member of the community at the end of Daytime Prayer. By ten minutes after twelve, Brother Matthew, Sister Scholastica, Sister Jane de Chantal, Brother Benedict, and Brother Francis, and Anthony made their way from the small, white, barn-like structure where they prayed in common day in and day out, to the larger but modest house for lunch.

Brother Benedict, in his very late sixties and appearing a little shorter than his five foot six inch height these days, pulled several trays of sandwich fixings out of the refrigerator while Sister Jane de Chantal placed a basket of bread on the table. The coffee machine sputtered and gurgled as green tea brewed. Lunch was usually informal and, contrary to breakfast and dinner, the community members engaged in conversation while eating. People sat around informally too—some on the couch, others in chairs or at the table.

Mediterranean looking, with a hint of silver at the edge of his thick black hair, Anthony struggled to fit in—not just at lunch—but also throughout his life. He could relate better to computers than he could to human beings he openly admitted to the Abbot

Francis when he had his initial interview, prior to being invited to do a one-month Observership with the community. This month would give both sides of the equation some time to observe one another prior to the possibility of Anthony entering the first phase of monastic life, known as Postulancy, which is what he was considering doing.

“Sometimes silent meals are easier, Anthony,” offered Brother Matthew, still in his simple or temporary vows. He had only been with the community about five years at this point and was just about fully recovered from a trauma he suffered while he was a novice.

Anthony gave a weak smile in response, while trying to balance a plate of food on his knees as he sat on the sofa in the large room, which served as living room, kitchen, and dining room. Some folks in the Pocono Mountains of Pennsylvania called such a living space a “great room” but that sounded a bit haughty for monastics. “Thanks for the comforting words. All of this is certainly a lot to get used to.”

“Give it time,” Brother Benedict hollered over from the sink. I didn’t enter until I was in my fifties. It does seem to be harder to adapt when we’re older but it certainly can be done. Many people going into monastic life and the clergy these days are older. Not like our Abbot, Brother Francis, who was seventeen years old when he joined monastic life.”

The Abbot just smiled, happy that others were leading the conversation. He was center-stage more than he cared to be.

“Do the math and you will figure out his age!” quipped Sister Jane de Chantal as Sister Scholastica added to the humor by counting on her fingers. “By the way, Sister Scholastica is just above five feet tall, and I’m just below six feet tall. That’s about the only personal data you’ll get from us so don’t even think about *our* ages,” she joked.

Sister Scholastica continued with the group effort to help Anthony feel at home. “We are all pretty much from the northeastern part of America. I understand that you are from California, Anthony. Do I have it right?”

“That’s correct, Sister. I’ve been ‘out West’ as you folks say, all of my life, working as a computer programmer most of my adult life. I made brief visits to several monasteries out there but none of them seemed to attract me. Your Salesian charism is a real draw to me, and the fact that you are a small community, and a dual community of men and women is nice too. You also have people come here for retreat, that appeals to me as well.” He stopped awkwardly, not knowing what to say next or how to end his sharing.

“I’ll bet you see movie stars from time to time in California,” Sister Jane de Chantal said as a way of breaking the silence.

“Yes Sister, I do. In fact, I lived next to Lucille Ball when I was little. There were others around too, but I don’t want to name drop.”

“Not to worry,” interjected Brother Benedict, “we can use a little excitement here sometimes. Feel free to fill us in on your adventures whenever you like. More baloney?” Everyone laughed and Anthony lost his plate of food with a splat.

“Don’t let this group get to you, Anthony. Community life requires a thick skin sometimes and we are just helping you to develop one,” Brother Matthew added as he sipped his green tea in a way indicating that he really enjoyed it.

Clean up was quick and easy. The community dispersed in order to finish up their morning tasks, clean up, rest, and prepare to gather once again for Evening Prayer. The

monastery was quiet again and Anthony found himself in his guest room wondering what he had gotten himself into.

### CHAPTER 3

The Oratory held a festive atmosphere at Evening Prayer time. Whereas at Daytime Prayer the community members were in their work clothes and smelled like cleaning products and paint, now they were in their monastic habits. Light gray tunics with navy blue scapulars down the front and back of each person, gathered together with a black leather belt, created a certain relaxed uniformity. The monks had a blue hood attached to the neck of their scapulars and the nuns wore a small blue veil with hair showing in the front.

Flowers, keyboard accompaniment, and candles all announced that a new week had started and that Sunday was beginning. Anthony fumbled with the colored ribbons, which served as bookmarks in his Office Book. Sister Scholastica came over to his pine wood podium-like choir stall and helped the Observer find his way through the celebration of Evening Prayer.

The community quietly piled into two cars and made the two-mile silent journey to the local parish church for the Eucharistic celebration of the vigil of Sunday. The monks and nuns of the early Church joined in with the larger Christian community for Eucharist, but over time they more and more celebrated Eucharist in their own monasteries. The Salesian Monastery, and some other small communities, had returned to the custom of joining with the People of God for Eucharist most of the time.

Though the local parish was about fifty years old, the worshippers had moved from a small wooden frame church to a newly built and much larger church in recent years. In accord with the directives of Vatican Council II, which aimed at revitalizing the Church and the People of God, the parish house of worship was very simple with lots of light and green plants visible behind large clear glass windows. Some parishioners longed for the old days. One woman was overheard telling her husband before Mass: “There are no statues here; I’m going to Saint Matthew’s next week.” Another person said that he thought that the church looked like a television studio. So much for simplicity!

Anthony was lost in a flurry of page turning during the service. He seemed embarrassed by it, as if he were trying to hide the fact that he was not well able to follow the liturgy.

After dinner some people played cards, took a walk, or just chatted. Recreation lasted for an hour and then there would be Night Prayer. Sister Scholastica invited Anthony to get a little fresh air with her by taking a walk outside. Fall was in the air and the leaves were bursting into a riot of color but were not at their peak yet. As the couple walked down Dairy Lane, they felt as if they had entered into a multicolored tunnel. The trees, still heavy with leaves, formed an arch above them.

“I was wondering if I can help you become more familiar with our liturgical books sometime, Anthony. Perhaps a little class would help you along.”

“That would be very helpful, Sister Scholastica,” Anthony responded. “I can use all the help I can get.”

The nun probed gently. “I’m a little surprised that you are not too familiar with our Liturgy of the Hours or Eucharist. You are Catholic and have spent some time looking into monastic life at other monasteries.”

“Oh that. You see, Sister, I am a *Ukrainian* Catholic. We are all part of the one Roman Catholic Church of course, but our branch of the Church has a much more Eastern liturgy.”

“That explains it,” the nun responded pensively. “Actually I thought you were of Italian descent.”

“My mother’s parents were from the Ukraine, and my father’s parents were from Italy.”

“What a rich background, Anthony! And now you are considering joining a spiritual family which was begun by two French people from the 1500s—Saint Francis de Sales and his spiritual companion Saint Jane de Chantal.

I have a friend who is a Ukrainian Catholic nun. She is in the Order of Saint Basil the Great. I’ve never met anyone who is more joyful. Unfortunately I rarely see her, but when I do its lots of laughs.”

“Tell me more about the community if you would, Sister. I get the impression that you have been through lots of adventures together, and not all of them happy ones.”

“One or another of us, or the entire group, has dealt with sickness, death, murder, international intrigue, romance, marriage, and just about anything else you can think of. We have been written up in the newspapers and gossiped about, but tend to land on our feet. Salesian spirituality is about dealing with what life hands you in the best way possible. Too often our need to control things gets in the way of our peace. I’ll stop now; this is starting to sound like a homily.”

“Not at all, Sister Scholastica, I appreciated hearing your view of the spirituality of your monastery. It’s one thing to read about it in holy books, but quite another to see it alive in other people.”

“Well, I don’t know if I’m such a good example of Salesian spirituality but I certainly do love Jesus and our spiritual teachers, Jane and Francis. Our motto is “Live Jesus!,” translated from *Vive Jesus!* in the French. This can be taken on several levels, you know, let Jesus live in everything, live as Jesus did, Jesus lives within each one who follows him, etc.”

“I guess the peace and wisdom you quietly radiate comes from living monastic life all these years.”

“Actually, Anthony, I’ve not yet taken my solemn or perpetual vows. I am in my late forties and entered the monastery less than ten years ago. If the solemnly professed community votes to accept me for final vows, then it is likely that I will make my solemn monastic profession in the new year.”

“After all these years, the community still has to vote on you?”

“That’s right. You are just starting out and your Observership is simply an informal visit to help us all to get to know one another. Then the various steps of incorporation into the community begin—Postulancy, Novitiate, Simple / Temporary vows, and finally Solemn / Perpetual vows. In our hearts we give ourselves to God and the community formally at Simple profession, but the Church requires a period of vowed probation, temporary vows for about five years prior to a final commitment. The only Order in the Church that makes perpetual vows immediately after completing their

novitiate years is the Jesuits. They seem to do lots of things differently. Saint Francis de Sales loved them—but that’s a story for another time. Here we are back at the monastery already.”

“Thanks for the walk and the conversation, Sister. It really helped. I think that you are going to be a special friend. By the way, what was your life like before you entered monastic life, may I ask?”

She hesitated. “Perhaps that would be best left for another time. However, even though I’ll do whatever I can to help you, Anthony, we are all in this together. The others will be gentle but firm with you also.”

“Gentle but firm?”

“That’s the maxim we try to live by and two of the main virtues we strive to follow as Salesians. Some think that being a Christian is being a wimp, but it requires a great deal of strength. There I go again giving a homily. See you at Night Prayer, Anthony.”

As they parted ways, the Oratory bell began to peal. The sound of the bell in a monastery is taken to be the voice of God calling the community to prayer. The community gathered in the Oratory as the sun was setting. Golden streams of light blended with darkness and painted the natural wood interior of the small chapel.

The Night Prayer Office includes a reflection about or raising of consciousness to the choices one made during the day past. Older theology called this an “Examination of *Conscience*,” which typically only included sinful actions and infractions against the Rule of the monastery. A revitalized theology takes a more wholistic and positive view of this review of the day and calls it an “Examination of *Consciousness*.” How mindful or aware were we during the day of God’s presence? What positive choices did we make? Did we celebrate them? Where is God inviting me to grow stronger?

Standing at their choir stalls, the community reflected on the day. Anthony became restless. He had read somewhere that monastic life is not so much about avoiding sin as it is about practicing virtue, e.g., charity, patience, prudence, and the like. Was he still fighting sin or was his focus now more on the practice of virtue? If so, which virtue was he focusing on? Which dominant fault was his trying to uproot? “All through love, nothing through fear.” That’s what Saint Francis de Sales says, isn’t it?

The Observer distractedly chanted through the psalms in the softly lit Oratory. The final prayers and chants of Night Prayer were followed by the sprinkling of Holy Water upon the head of each person by Abbot Francis. Anthony prayed for a renewal of his life, a changing from what was to what he was on the brink of becoming.

Later in his cell, the monastic equivalent of a simple bedroom, he felt the increasing sense of tension deep inside that was so very familiar to him. He prayed that it would pass. Finally, mercifully, sleep took him.

## CHAPTER 4

Like many families do, the custom of the monastery was to clip a scrap of paper to the refrigerator with a magnet as an evolving shopping list. The nuns and monks simply wrote down their needs, or what was running low, and the shopper would pick them up on his or her weekly trip to the super market. Sister Scholastica dug deeply in the folds

of her habit for her Cross pen, given to her as a Christmas gift, and nicer than the usual plastic Bics the community depended upon as writing instruments.

“I’m forever losing pens,” she mumbled to no one special—for no one was around. “I did pretty well in hanging on to my silver one from last Christmas. It will turn up. In the meanwhile, it’s back to Bics.” The small-framed woman scribbled “eggs” on the shopping list and went back to preparing the evening meal.

Some of the members ate meat, and some were vegetarian. Many of their meals included “fake” chicken, hamburgers, sausage patties, and hot dogs. The monks and nuns had become rather expert in these soy / tofu products. *Some* brands provided lots of mortification—death to one’s own will. Other brands tasted pretty good. “Morningstar Farms” was the universally agreed upon favorite for “fake” meat in the monastery. Tonight’s meal would include Morningstar Farms fake chicken patties with whole-wheat hamburger rolls.

After Evening Prayer, the community assembled around the dinner table. An audiotope of the now deceased Trappist monk Thomas Merton was playing as the community shared a meal in reflective silence. Merton, a pioneer in the area of East-West spirituality dialogue spoke to his novices on the tape about the monastic vow called Conversion of Life. He was not speaking of the avoidance of wrongdoing, which we struggle with to some degree all of our lives. Merton was talking about a purification of heart and the practice of virtue. It takes several large *metanoias*, or deep changes of heart, to sustain a monastic vocation. One conversion simply gets the monastic into the monastery; a few other major ones help to keep the person there when things get rough, especially during the early years in community. Not too different from marriage, when one thinks about it.

The Salesian Monastery welcomed guests for retreat from time to time. They simply joined in with the community to the degree that they wished. Some came for a day or weekend, others stayed for a week or even longer. Several men and women arrived shortly after Anthony began his Observership. One woman was from New York City and grateful for a little relief from the corporate world. A man from Lancaster County PA also arrived fatigued from his house painting business. A young man from New Jersey who worked in the family produce business was also at the monastery for retreat. He had lost his right arm in an accident of some sort several years prior and seemed to have adjusted well to the new challenges the situation presented daily. Fortunately, he had always been left-handed.

The first week of Observership went by uneventfully. The monastic community, Observer, and guests fell into a rhythm of life easily, thanks in large part to the monastery Rule and horarium, or daily schedule.

One evening during recreation, Anthony and Brother Matthew sat and chatted on the barn red porch of the white building that served as the main monastery building. They were surrounded by green vegetation splashed with color as fall continued to announce its arrival. Rain fell softly upon the rooftop and the foliage. A few birds did their evening exercise in the air prior to sleep.

“So, how are you making out Anthony?”

“I’m okay, Brother Matthew, still trying to fit in, you know.”

“I surely do. My Postulancy and Novitiate were a real struggle for me.

Observership was easy, because I thought I knew what I wanted—this life. After making

my entrance more formal by being accepted as a Postulant, however, something changed. The fact that, even though I was at a very *beginning* phase, I was now a part of the community and it gave me the willies! I had been engaged to be married prior to that but broke it off to enter here.”

“That surprises me, Brother. You seem so content.”

“I am content, Anthony, but that doesn’t mean that I have not struggled. If you really try to live life honestly then I think hard choices present themselves and one needs to respond, not just put them off. We have so many people who come here to discern their vocations but they really don’t want to commit. Have your cake and eat it too sort of thing. They are not open to really changing and *becoming* a monk or a nun—a lifelong process. That Conversion of Life thing Merton was talking about last week on our audiotape at the evening meal one night.”

Anthony fidgeted in his creaky old aluminum and wood folding chair and sounded a little angry. “I have my own personality and interests. Am I expected to give all of that up?”

Brother Matthew spoke gently. “Not *all* of it by any means. We each need to bring to the community our own unique gifts, talents, and personalities. It’s just that each monastery has a Rule of life and charism or spirit that it follows. I suppose the challenge is to see if the spirit of the monastery and our spirit are a good match—does living this life enhance who we are or does it stifle us. Listen to me, a youngster to this life and younger than you talking like this.”

Anthony spoke hesitantly. “That’s no problem at all. It really helps me. You see, sometimes a certain tension builds up within me and I fear doing something harmful.”

“You mean something that may weaken the desire you have to become a monk, or provoke us to ask you to leave the community?”

“Something like that,” the Observer mumbled with eyes downcast.

“Has anyone seen my Office Book? Not the ones we use in the Oratory, but the one I keep in my room,” questioned Sister Jane de Chantal one day after Daytime Prayer.

“You took it with you to Pocono Auto when you took the Olds in for repairs last week and used it while you were waiting there, didn’t you?” answered Brother Benedict.

“That’s right, but I thought that I had it since then and can’t seem to find it. It’s not in my room. I don’t think I left it at Pocono Auto, but maybe I’ll give them a call just in case.”

“Some mechanic is probably addicted to the Divine Office,” joked Brother Benedict.

“They are so nice to us over there, you may be right. I sometimes think that some of those guys would be a good choice for a doctor—*lots* of time spent with them—and all sorts of machines for diagnosing things.”

The retreatant from New Jersey joined in the lunchtime chatter. “I’ve had lots of doctors and mechanics during my life. I think it is the quality of the person that matters most. You know that if you are honest and try to follow through, eventually something good will come of it. If you are deceptive and don’t care, it only leads to frustration.”

“Lots of wisdom there,” added Sister Jane de Chantal with a smile. She continued: “Anthony, you look especially relaxed, or is it *relieved*?”

“I’m feeling good these days, Sister. Guess I’m starting to adjust to community life.”

“It never completely happens,” Brother Benedict added. “The life itself calls us to adjust continually. I suppose that’s what Saint Francis de Sales and Saint Jane de Chantal mean when they invite us to be like a ball of wax in the hand of God.”

The New Jersey guest retreatant commented, sounding like a New Yorker in his speech. “A ball of wax is a much gentler image than fire and brimstone. I would like to get to know more about your spiritual mother and father.”

“There are lots of books and tapes around here. I’ve been through most of them and now use them more for devotional purposes rather than educational,” mentioned Sister Scholastica, trying to be helpful to the guest.

## CHAPTER 5

Brother Matthew was a great one for creating community adventures. “Well, since we are all in such good moods, why don’t we take a hike in the Delaware Water Gap this week end?”

His suggestion received unanimous approval.

Soon it was Sunday afternoon and the gang piled into two cars. In about fifteen minutes they were crossing the bridge from Pennsylvania into New Jersey, the Delaware River flowing peacefully below them. The town of Delaware Water Gap, locally famous for the Deerhead Inn and other folk and craft establishments, was in Pennsylvania and offered several trails through the huge cleft in the earth, which made up the Gap. The Gap itself spanned both Pennsylvania and New Jersey.

The two cars made a right into the parking lot for the Visitor’s Center just after they crossed the bridge. Several men and women Rangers, complete with Smokey the Bear outfits on, stood behind a long counter and expertly helped hikers and visitors choose trails to hike and places of beauty and interest to explore.

The monastic hikers chose Sunfish Pond as their destination. The hike would take about four hours total and was an uphill climb, with the Pond at the top. They ambled by streams and waterfalls and started out on their journey quite animated. Lots of laughter and stories were shared. Eventually the group became more contemplative and broke into little groups, quietly sharing thoughts about the week past or life in general.

Brother Matthew’s thick brown hair, along with the rainbow of leaves overhead, protected his scalp from the warm sunlight. Just the same he eventually wanted to put on his baseball cap. He rummaged around in his backpack for his headgear. “Let’s see,” he mumbled, “We have a bag of peanuts, a chocolate bar from our community friend Doty, a book about the friendship between Saint Jane and Saint Francis called *Bond of Perfection*, and a lightweight jacket. Hmm, no cap. I’m sure that I put it in the pack, but I guess it must be back at the monastery.”

“Are people who devote their lives to contemplation always so forgetful?” queried Anthony.

“Maybe so,” Brother Matthew responded thoughtfully. “I guess thinking so much about the God of heaven keeps our heads in the clouds. Though this is the first time I can

remember that so many of us are losing little things. Usually we pay pretty good attention to detail.”

The road along the Kittatinny Ridge, which they were hiking, became very rocky. It would be easy to twist an ankle on this route. After a hike of about two hours the small band saw Sunfish Pond glistening before them, calling out to them to rest and refresh themselves. This body of water is a Registered National Landmark in New Jersey. It is the first glacier-formed lake along the Appalachian Trail heading north. The pH level of the water makes the Pond crystal clear and fosters the life of the Sunfish who inhabit it, but not other species of fish.

The hikers found quiet places to be alone for a while and reflect. Such natural hermitages were quite easy to find among the tall and dense vegetation and rocks that surround Sunfish Pond. The stillness magnified the sounds of the birds, frogs, and other wildlife that made this place their home.

Brother Matthew, try as he might to keep his focus on the mantra he had been using for meditation in recent days, could not do so. The “Healer of my soul” repeated over and over was drowned out by a question that lightly nagged at the back of his mind.

*Why were little things disappearing around the monastery? Why waste my time thinking about it? Maybe it was nothing; maybe it was something. Our community has a way of attracting unusual occurrences.*

He tried again: “Healer of my soul, healer of my soul, healer of my soul.” It was going a little better now that the young monk had admitted to himself that something unsettled him. His mind settled and he was absorbed in God.

In a flash the one-hour of allotted meditation time was over and the group re-gathered at the trail that would take them back down the mountain to the parking lot and Route 80. The trek back was easier because it was downhill all the way.

The hikers peacefully descended the mountain, enjoying nature as they walked. Somehow their meditation heightened their senses and everything was more colorful and alive to them now.

“This area has such a rich history,” Brother Matthew mentioned to nobody in particular. About 18,000 years ago a large glacier gouged out a hollow. That hollow filled with water and became Sunfish Pond. One historian described the Pond as a ‘sheet of pure transparent water...strangely and unaccountably situated on the very summit of the mountain.’”

Sister Scholastica wondered aloud: “Didn’t some millionaire live in this area way back?”

“My interest in history sometimes serves me well, Sister Scholastica. Yes, a businessman named Charles Worthington owned about 8,000 acres spanning both sides of the Delaware River and had a small mansion here—if there is such a thing as a small mansion. Sunfish Pond supplied the water for his home. He knew what to do with getting the water to his residence because he was President of the Worthington Pump Corporation in the early 1900s. He did his hunting in the surrounding forest.”

Anthony joined in the conversation. “I don’t know how many ‘greats’ are involved, but Charles Worthington was a great grandfather of mine. It is wonderful to be here and finally see this area. Now I know why the family stories about Great Grandfather Worthington lived on in our family line from generation to generation, down to the present.” The Observer to monastic life seemed proud and confident.

The others questioned Anthony for more details he might know about his distant relative. What he had already shared was about all he knew.”

“Maybe we can do an internet search about Charles Worthington,” Sister Jane de Chantal suggested. “You know, trace his family tree or something. I believe the Mormons are expert at helping people find their roots and I think they have a genealogy website.”

Anthony gave a half-hearted “Yes” to the suggestion. It appeared as if someone had just knocked the wind out of his sails.

## CHAPTER 6

The Office of Compline, Night Prayer, had a way of wrapping the monastery in a peaceful stillness at each nightfall. After that prayer service, the Grand Silence would begin and conclude after breakfast the following morning. Unlike the simple silence of the day, which could be broken out of charity or necessity, Grand Silence required a stronger reason to speak.

During the night silence the community was able to sink more deeply into the contemplative spirit, most people quietly reading or working in their rooms on a craft or personal needs, then settling into sleep.

There was an unaccounted for person lurking about during Grand Silence this evening. No one really saw her, so she could spend a quiet night at the monastery too. She would probably be gone before dawn anyway.

*I've got to watch out for him. This little community has been in the news a lot--even though they say that they are semi-cloistered and would prefer to live simply and quietly.*

*He's new here, probably won't stay anyway. In the meanwhile I'd better protect him from the others. They seem to be a prying lot. Why do they need to know so much about the background of a person before they accept him or her?*

*I remember that Tibetan Abbot asking about Christian monastics. He had heard that it was a difficult and slow process to become a full-fledged monk or nun in the Christian tradition. When someone explained that this was certainly the case he just laughed and laughed, then said: “That's probably why you Christians have so few monks and nuns!”*

*Maybe I'll just check things out here on the property. Everyone seems to be asleep and I can't sleep. Hope the floorboards don't creak. A woman walking around in the men's sleeping quarters, even on the lower floor, is sure to capture attention if someone spots me. Good thing I disguised myself.*

*Yep, everyone is asleep—a few are even snoring. Good, got downstairs and outside without a hitch. Let's see if I can get into the main building and check out the files. It's nice to know the background of the people I have to deal with in order to protect him.*

*Drat, the front door is locked. Maybe there is a spare key in the lower level of the guest house, below the men's quarters. I'll slip back and see.*

*The glow of the moon is beautiful as I walk across the property. Too bad things are not always what they appear to be.*

*Hmm, desk, cupboards, table with drawers, where to begin? The desk looks interesting. Not much in it except writing paper, envelopes, pens, and some post cards with photos of the monastery on them.*

*This old breakfront might hold some keys. It opens easily but only has extra blankets and pillows in it—also a game of Scrabble and a game of Uno—very well used.*

*I think that I hear a little rattle as I close the doors. Something is tapping at the back of the breakfront. Just a slip of the hand should do it. There they are! Several keys hanging on a key ring. Not marked. Bet they are for the front door of the main house in case of emergency.*

*Thank you Man in the Moon for lighting my way and letting everything else remain in darkness. First key doesn't work—the second one does! Quiet now, I'm trying to protect him, not get him into trouble.*

*Through the foyer and into the great room. That old buffet is probably a catch all for things. There are no locks on it, however, so whatever is inside is probably not too important.*

*The drawers and doors are old and squeak a little. Slowly, slowly. There, the large middle drawer is open. Looks like a lot of mailing equipment—scale, stapler, blank mailing labels, padded mailing bags. Must be for the things they sell mail order.*

*The two slimmer drawers on top are filled with old audio-tapes and papers, nothing very personal.*

*Someone is stirring downstairs in the women's quarters. I'd better get out of here. Come to think of it, anything personal about the community members is probably over in the Hermitage, the Abbot's quarters, anyway.*

*She tiptoed out into the silver night and across the driveway. The second key on the ring let her into the white mobile home purchased about ten years ago to stretch the quarters of the monastery. She froze in the doorway marked "Welcome" upon hearing a single beeping sound. No other audible alarm sounded.*

*I pray that there is no silent alarm hooked up. Hopefully that beep is just there to let the Abbot know that someone is in his waiting room. One more beep sounded as the specter-like figure closed the door behind her.*

*The rest room was in front of her and the small reception area was to her right. Several framed diplomas and licenses hung on the walls and a large tonka of the Medicine Buddha, given to the Abbot by a group of dear friends while he was in Tibet and neighboring lands, gave off a dark blue aura under the bath of moonlight flowing in through the window.*

*There's his office, complete with a name plate on the door, and the door is wide open. Well, well, well, what have we here? Looks like a filing cabinet to me. Drat! It's locked. Where would the key be? Maybe in the desk at the front right of this rectangular office space. Too many odds and ends in the desk—and on it!*

*Where is that light coming from? Someone is outside, I'm sure of it. I'll just lift up a slat on this mini-blind and risk it. It's a woman and she's walking this way. No, wait a minute, she's heading toward the Oratory now. Must be a late night meditator. Get me out of here while the coast is relatively clear. Good, she's inside the Oratory now and has left the lights off. Hopefully she won't hear the beep of the door.*

*Out I go and if she is not looking out the window I'm safe. Made it back to the men's guest house without incident. I'd better just hide out for a while.*

Sister Scholastica, alone in the quiet of the darkened Oratory, was starting to get the creeps.

## CHAPTER 7

Brother Francis was overwhelmed. India is enormous and can literally assault every sense organ.

*How about that lady at the bus station in Delaware Water Gap asking if I was a member of AARP! The truth be told, I am certainly old enough to be a card-carrying member but I have not joined.*

*People are so kind. The ticket seller in the next booth made me laugh when she poked her head around the dividing wall and gave a stage whisper to her colleague: "He's clergy." Technically I am a "Religious," one publicly bound to God by vows and a rule of life, including the celebration of the Liturgy of the Hours daily in the name of the Church*

*At any rate, I don't know how she knew I was a monk but I think I got an even bigger discount for that than for an AARP membership. I did have to hand the bus driver that ticket with "CHARITY" computer printed in large bold type, however.*

The Abbot of the Salesian Monastery had taken a bus from Pennsylvania, and then another bus from Port Authority in Manhattan to get to JFK airport in New York. Since he never flew out of JFK before, Brother Francis gave himself a large time allowance to get to the airport. The cleaning staff must have thought that the monk was having a crisis of faith. Every once in a while a cleaner would push his or her cart past one of the four small houses of worship entered through large glass doors inside the JFK terminal and Brother Francis would be in yet another prayer space.

He started out in the All Faiths Chapel. It had white walls and splashes of rose here and there on the white. The stained glass windows in the front of the square room portrayed no particular picture or event but their pastel shades were conducive to meditation and an oasis of calm from the frenetic activity of the airport proper.

The monk next made his way to the Catholic Chapel. The Word of God and the Blessed Sacrament were there to welcome him. He celebrated Daytime Prayer alone there from his Office Book.

Brother Francis excitedly waited in line at the ticket counter. The signs were vague and it was a little difficult to see just where the snaking queue of travelers ended up. Eventually a ground attendant came along and Francis found out that he was in a line for Tokyo. The ticket counter for Air India and his flight would open in a few hours, he was told.

His travel arrangements from Delhi to Dharmasala in northern India was made by a friend of a friend in India and consisted of an overnight bus ride. Several people said: "Don't take the bus." It was too late; arrangements were made. It would be fine he told himself unconvincingly.

The monk wandered the huge halls of JFK Airport keeping an eye out for his traveling companion. Andre was a mix of laughter and seriousness, quietness and assertiveness. A naturopathic medical student, he hailed from Montreal and had a slight French Canadian lilt to his soft voice.

Brother Francis had a natural tonsure and the rest of his scalp was ringed in a wide band of silvery brown. He laughed at himself for telling Andre that he coveted the jet black hair which the mid-thirties man pulled back in a pony tail. Armenian genes gave Andre an air of dark mystery and a spirit of adventure.

Above the din, Francis heard his name being called softly, as if in a simpler and quieter key than the cacophony swirling around him. It was Andre. He turned his head to the right and there was the smiling protégé of the monk.

“*Andre mon frere, comment allez vous?*”

“*Je vais bien, Frere Francois,*” Andre responded with a bright smile. “See, you haven’t forgotten your college French. We will talk more *en France* during our Indian pilgrimage of medicine and spirituality.”

“Not if I can help it,” the monk playfully responded. “I’m still being treated for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder from having studied that language. I spent three times as much time on French than on any other subject in college—or grad school for that matter. Yet, I’m glad that I do know a little French. It is the language of our founders, Saint Francis de Sales and Saint Jane de Chantal.”

“So I remember, Brother. By the way, where are we going?”

“To India of course,” Brother Francis answered, a bit confused.

“No, I mean *now*. We are walking through these cavernous halls with no particular destination. Great travelers *we* are. Not even out of the States yet and we are walking in circles. I’m glad I had that seminar here in the States so we can fly over together, otherwise I would have had to meet you there since I’d be flying from Montreal.”

“You are right, Andre. I haven’t the slightest idea where we are walking to. How about something to eat? That always helps when we are lost—forget trying to apply logic to that statement. I do know where the food is and it will at least give us a destination.”

“Sounds like a plan, Bro.”

The lower level of their terminal held an enormous food court. They decided on Italian with Krispy Kremes for dessert. There would be few doughnuts in India. With Italian food, the vegetarian monk and the carnivorous naturopathic doctor to be could both eat to their heart’s content.

“You know, Brother, everyone who heard that we were traveling from Delhi to Dharmsala by bus said: ‘Don’t take the bus.’ I wonder what that was all about.”

“Same here, Andre. I suppose we will find out soon enough.”

After dinner the pair made their way companionably to the Air India ticket counter. The process of obtaining their boarding passes and checking their bags with security went surprisingly well.

The transition from the terminal building to the aircraft felt like a transition from America to India and they had not even left the ground yet. Indian folks with Indian snacks and Indian chatter surrounded them. A very nice man in a seat in front of them stood up and turned around to greet the two travelers. When he heard that they were taking a bus from Delhi to Dharmsala the two said in unison: “We know, don’t take the bus.”

The Indian man broke into a broad smile. “Sounds like others have given you some words of wisdom too. Don’t worry. You will be fine. It’s just that it takes a long time, the road is bumpy, and it’s dark and cold.”

“We can handle that—can’t we Andre?”

“Of course. It’s very—how you say—ascetical.”

Most people, especially East Indians, would say that the food on the plane was delicious. Brother Francis, unfortunately, had what he referred to as a “curry problem.” He just couldn’t get it down. His monastic Rule encouraged him to eat what was set before him in a spirit of gratitude. This guideline did not apply if it would make someone sick. Francis was grateful for this common sense dispensation. Common sense was a hallmark of Salesian spirituality in his opinion. But what would he eat in India?

## CHAPTER 8

As the plane taxied down an interminable runway, a young woman with a heart-melting smile and a complexion the color of polished mahogany turned around in her seat and began chatting with the two pilgrims. Extremely extraverted, she made no apology for her excitement at finally getting to go to India—her lifelong wish.

Andre and Brother Francis enjoyed sharing her joy. They, too, were filled with excitement about a trip which would take them to the other side of the world. As the twenty-something young lady turned to sit face forward in her seat again she thanked the gentlemen for their conversation and “complimented” the fifty-eight year old Brother Francis by telling him what a warm and wonderful “grandfatherly” image he possessed.

The two men laughed heartily at the thought of Brother Francis being called grandfatherly. The woman apologized because she realized that this was probably the first time someone thought of the monk as appearing grandfatherly.

“I suppose that others will be hearing about this, Andre.”

“Only your closest one thousand friends and associates, dear Brother.”

Thank God for a sense of humor, thought the monk.

It was four thirty in the morning by the time the travelers arrived at the Sri Aroubindo ashram in Delhi. A large gate, complete with heavy chain and padlock welcomed them. The taxi driver did a considerable amount of yelling, horn honking, and banging on the gate before Brother Francis could quiet him down enough for the driver to notice and use the electronic door bell and speaker system next to the gate.

Within minutes a weary looking little brown man of about forty years of age walked down the spottily lit driveway and let the duo in.

There was an air of peace and security at the ashram, even though it was dark outside and the place and people unknown to the two friends. Boiled water, the only kind which was drinkable, and a simple room with marble floor and walls, waited for them. The small canister of shower water which was mounted on the wall of the bathroom was heated by the flick of an electric switch. It took about twenty minutes for the water to heat. The weary pair showered and flopped into low beds made of wooden platforms topped with thick mats. They were more than grateful for their spartan accommodations and soon drifted off to sleep.

The blazing Asian sun woke them in a few hours. Dressed informally in shorts and sandals, the pair made their way to an open-air breakfast area. Brother Francis ate his round *roti* pancake-like bread but couldn't get much of the curry-laced breakfast down otherwise. They washed their tin plates at the outdoor sink and placed them on the wooden rack as was the custom.

“Let's find the temple, Brother.”

“You read my mind, Andre.”

They wandered through gardens and past buildings of various sizes and shapes. There was a craft building, a vocational school, garages for farm equipment, and a variety of outdoor shrines. Eventually they came upon a single story simple building, just a little like something one would find in the Southwest of the United States. It was beige in color and had an open porch all around it. The floor inside was covered with a similar colored shag rug for the most part. The front and center area, which housed a large carved wooden image of Lord Shiva with a circle of wood surrounding him, had marble flooring. It is the eternal dance of God in the form of Shiva which, according to Hindu theology, keeps all of life going. The overall ambiance of the temple gave one the impression of reverence and simplicity at the same time.

A sign said that a *pujah*, a Hindu prayer service, would begin in about half an hour. The friends agreed to spend the time in private meditation—something both of them saw as vital to their lives.

The sounds of nature created a peaceful backdrop as the meditators allowed themselves to be swallowed up by the Void, as the Buddhists would say. Here were two Christians praying in a Hindu temple, and completely comfortable with the concept of the Void. All are one in Christ.

Andre moved into a *Shamatha / Vipassana* meditation, alternating between what is sometimes translated as “Calm abiding” and “Insight.” He did what he could to keep his mind peacefully resting on one point, for the word *Shamatha* means peace. He sat on the floor in the lotus position, legs intertwined, with the back of his right hand lightly resting in the palm of his left hand. The Canadian's dark eyes chose a jasmine flower, part of a larger arrangement at the base of Lord Shiva, for their focus. Eyes half-closed, Andre gently returned to the golden flower whenever his mind would wander to other things.

Every ten minutes or so the naturopathic medical student would shift to *Vipassana*, or insight meditation, and mentally scan his body. Andre would focus his attention on the top of his head and slowly move downward through his physical body. Whatever the meditator would experience was accepted without judgment or evaluation. He felt a certain lightness in his head, his nose was just a little stuffy, his heart was filled with gratitude, and his entire being revered God.

On the other side of the large quiet room, Brother Francis sat back on a low wooden prayer bench which he had placed over his ankles. His “half-Irish” skin did not always take to the sun, but this morning it felt life-giving as Brother Sun washed over him from a nearby window.

After placing himself in the presence of God, something Saint Francis de Sales and Saint Jane de Chantal encouraged all the followers of Jesus to do prior to any prayer, the Christian monk began a “Following the Breath” meditation. He simply paid attention

to his breathing in and breathing out. Francis was convinced that the core of all people is good. He believed that what is most valuable about us, the gold of the person, as Swiss Analyst Carl Jung might say, lies deep within.

More importantly for Francis, all were created in God's image and that likeness resided in the core of one's being and could never be harmed, scarred, or taken away. The muck and mire of life splash upon the core and hide it, even from ourselves, but it always remains there. Some of us sometimes confuse the accidents of a person for his or her substance, i.e., physical attributes, wealth, possessions, etc. can be thought to be the measure of a person rather than what is on the inside.

Meditation, for this monk was a way to access this sacred core through the guidance of the Holy Spirit. There need be no particular insight or understanding gained on a conscious level during the meditation. The time spent in this form of prayer was simply a way to open oneself up to God. Each return from distraction to following the breath was a "yes" to God, a way of saying "do with me whatever you will and I will mindfully cooperate."

The fruit of meditation, as this veteran meditator understood such things, was often revealed outside of the formal meditation times. Meditation might make one stronger in the faith, more patient, more honest with oneself or God, or perhaps more courageous in dealing with one's own faults or the faults of others. Above all, it kept one in contact with God and the goodness within each person. This philosophy was a far cry from the spiritual sado-masochism of the middle ages which thought that pain and suffering equaled holiness. Dealing with the everyday issues of life was more than enough to make anyone holy, Francis firmly believed.

## CHAPTER 9

There are times when meditation seems to lag and the one meditating is restless but somehow remains faithful to his or her prayer. There are other times when meditation is deeply absorbing and time passes all too quickly, even though one has lost all concept of time while meditating. The latter was the experience for both travelers that day.

They finished their prayer at the same time, almost as if on cue. When each person opened his eyes, he realized that the temple was now filled with several hundred worshippers, all sitting very comfortably on the floor due to sitting in this fashion all of their lives. No backrests were even necessary.

Both Andre and Brother Francis normally did the practice of *metta* at the end of their meditations. They filled their minds and bodies with thoughts and feelings of good will for all sentient beings—every created living thing—not only human beings.

A tall brown-skinned man in his forties, wrapped in orange robes, entered the sanctuary area near the image of Lord Shiva. The worshippers stood up out of reverence. The Swami smiled and motioned with his hands for the group to be seated. In the Hindu tradition, a Swami is the equivalent of a Christian monk. Hindu priests have a separate vocation which deals with the fine details of the liturgical life of the Hindu and they are typically married and wear white robes.

The Swami is celibate, his orange robes a symbol of renunciation of the world and the flame of love motivating that state of life. The Swamis are the teachers, sometimes

called gurus. “*Gu*” is the root of the word for darkness and “*ru*” the root of the word for light. The Swami is one who takes us from darkness into light through his teaching. This state of life is also lived to its fullness by women as well, though they are fewer in number than the men, and the feminine title is “Swamini.” Renunciates in the Hindu tradition are generically called “Sannyasin.”

“Do you feel a kinship with other monastics, Brother, not only Christian ones?”

“Very much so, Andre. Even though my “root guru” is Jesus and this Swami follows the teachings the Hindu scriptures, we are one on a deeper level.”

“Same thing with Buddhists?”

“Yes, the same things with Buddhists, Andre. I know a little bit more about Buddhism than I do about Hinduism so there is more of an emotional connection with Buddhist practitioners, especially their monks and nuns. This is my first trip to India and, building on the foundation of the teachings I learned at the ashram near our monastery in Pennsylvania, I’m ready to learn more.”

“How much time did you spend at the Pennsylvania ashram, Brother Francis?”

“I went there every Sunday to study with the swamis for many years, and continue to use their facilities to host gatherings for that specialty of Chinese medicine called qigong there as well. I hope your own qigong studies are going well.”

Andre nodded happily.

“Ladies and gentlemen, honored guests, it is my pleasure to speak to you on this beautiful morning about one of the foundational concepts of our Hindu tradition—*Advaita Vedanta*. In order to accomplish this, and in order to help our Western visitors along, I will share in English a little material from *A Brief Dictionary of Hinduism* published by Vedanta Press in 1962. *Vedanta* means “the end of the *Vedas*,” that is, teachings at the end of a part of our scriptures called by that name.

“It is a religious philosophy which has evolved from the teachings of the latter, or knowledge portion of *Vedas* (the *Upanishads*). In this sense, it is the common basis of all religious sects of India. From the strictly philosophical standpoint, *Vedanta* is one of the six *Darshans* (systems of orthodox Hindu thought) and based upon the *Vedanta* sutras, which in turn have given rise to various interpretations. Through all its varied shades (dualistic, qualified non-dualistic, pluralistic, realistic, and non-dualistic), *Vedanta* teaches that the purpose of our life is to realize the ultimate Reality, or Godhead, here and now, through spiritual practice.

“The word *Vedanta* may refer solely to the non-dualistic aspect of the philosophy, *Advaita Vedanta*. *Advaita Vedanta* declares that the manifold universe of name and form is a misreading of the one ultimate Reality. This Reality is called Brahman when regarded as transcendent, and Atman when regarded as immanent. Since it is omnipresent, this Reality must be within every creature and object; humans, therefore, are essentially divine. Direct super-conscious experience of our identity with Atman-Brahman releases us from all worldly bondages we have superimposed on our true nature, granting us spiritual perfection and eternal peace.

“Vedanta accepts all the great spiritual teachers and personal or impersonal aspects of the Godhead worshipped by different religions, considering them as manifestations of one Reality. By demonstrating the essential unity at the source of all religions, *Vedanta* serves as a framework within which all spiritual truth may be

expressed. *Vedanta* is often, but less correctly, called Hinduism, a word first used by the Persians for the inhabitants of India, because they lived on the far side of the river Sindhu, or Indus.”

The guru paused for effect and to gather his thoughts.

“Boy, that was a mouthful, Bro!”

“Shhh. Do you want to get us thrown out? We would be the first non-Hindus in thousands of years, since their beginning, to get bounced.”

“Oops! It’s really very beautiful. Just reacting a little because there were so many philosophical concepts offered by the Swami. If we could all really live like that the world would be transformed for the better.”

“I agree Andre. While Jesus is my life, I am captivated by the way these folks express their teachings. They seem more focused on God than on themselves or on an institutional structure.”

“This Canadian still can’t grasp the idea of *Advaita* very well. Hope he can clear that up for me.”

The Swami, drawing upon his earlier cited source and with a calm and soothing voice, continued his teaching:

“There are three main schools of thought in *Vedanta*, one or more of which are also found in other religions. They are:

“Dualism / *Dvaita*, qualified non-dualism / *Vishishtadvaita*, and non-dualism / *Advaita Vedanta*. These three concepts are not mutually contradictory, but successive steps in spiritual realization—as Sri Ramakrishna pointed out—the third and last being attained when the aspirant loses all consciousness of self in union with the Godhead. To illustrate the three attitudes, Sri Ramakrishna quoted Hanuman’s words addressed to Sri Rama: “When I consider myself as a physical being, thou art the master, I am thy servant. When I consider myself as an individual being, thou art the whole, I am one of thy many parts. And when I realize myself as the Atman, I am one with thee.”

“Bro, I think Sri Ramakrishna was a Hindu teacher. We studied him a little in philosophy class. He experienced his union with God by following various Hindu paths, along with Christianity and Islam. It’s all too complicated for me. My question is, who is this Hanuman person?”

“I wish they had a cry room here like they do in Catholic churches. At the risk of setting back the last forty years of monastic Interreligious dialogue I’ll whisper it to you.”

“Based on the little I know, Hanuman is revered as a great devotee of God when God is manifested in the form of Rama. That’s different from Sri Ramakrishna. In general, there is one God in the Hindu tradition but God is manifested in a multitude of different forms, Rama being one. In the Hindu scriptures one can read about the great devotion Hanuman, who had a face like a monkey, displayed toward Lord Rama.”

“These names are killing me. They either contain all the letters of the alphabet or they are so similar that I find it difficult to keep one person, or name of God, distinct from the other.”

“I understand Andre, but I find that my captivation and respect for the Hindu devotion to the Sacred overrides all of that and that is where I choose to focus my attention. We’d better do some of that now before we get a penance.”

The teacher concluded without the temple bouncers having to evict the two Western pilgrims. Everyone made his or her way outside where a smiling man placed

little white paper containers with what appeared to be oatmeal into a hand of each worshipper.

The man explained that this custom, called the giving of *prasad*, the Sanskrit word for gift, takes place at the end of a service or teaching. The *prasad* can be nuts, raisins, or any other little treat.

“The listeners were now chatting about the spiritual conference which had just taken place and happily nibbling away at their treat.

“Brother Francis, they are eating with their hands again. I can’t do it. I even saved my plastic spoon from the plane to avoid it. They slipped this one in on us.”

“We can do it Andre. Just watch me.

“Ouch, this stuff is still hot. I burnt my fingertips!”

“How are you gentlemen making out? I hope you enjoyed my conference more than you seem to be enjoying your *prasad*!”

“I’m sure it is delicious Swami,” responded Brother Francis apologetically. “It’s just that we are not used to eating with our hands.”

“Don’t give it another thought. I’ll show you where the secret stash of spoons is in the dining room. I studied in the West and had to make a few adjustments there too, so I completely understand what you must be going through.”

“You are every bit as compassionate as your beautiful Hindu theology teaches you to be,” said Andre, now on his best behavior.

“It looked like you had a few questions during the talk, my young friend. Can I be of help?”

“Well yes, Swami, it’s just hard for me to wrap my mind around the concept of *Advaita*.”

“Understandably, and it’s Andre, isn’t it?” Andre nodded and his black pony tail bounced.

“*Advaita* is simply the belief that there is really no distinction between God and humanity. The image of a wave and the ocean is one typically used to help illustrate the teaching.

“Is the wave a separate entity from the ocean or the ocean a separate entity from the wave, Andre?”

“No, not really, they are both of the same substance,” responded the student pensively.

“And so it is with the Godhead and us in *Advaita*. We have the experience of being separate from God but we are not, and enlightenment, so to speak, is coming to experience that.”

“It sounds like Christian theology, but I think there is a subtle twist somewhere. Brother Francis, can you help me out?” asked Andre.

“I’m not a professional theologian. My focus, as you know Andre, is much more on spirituality and meditation, not so much on dogma. We need some dogma, but I leave that up to the intellectuals.

“Anyway, in Christianity we believe that we strive for union with God and yet already have it. We believe that we will experience it in fullness in the life to come. In the meanwhile we try to live a spiritual life here on earth, enjoy it wherever possible, and nourish our spiritual lives through prayer and meditation.

“When we die, we do not lose our individuality, but it is brought to its fullness in Christ. We will even have bodies, but they will be “glorified” bodies. No one has explained to my satisfaction, what that will be like. As the great mystic of the middle-ages, Julian of Norwich, used to say: “All will be well; and all manner of things will be well.” I don’t know exactly how this will all happen, or what form it will all take, but do believe that.”

“Swami, can you help us with the ‘subtle twist’ Andre senses in all of this?”

“Certainly, Brother, anything for a fellow monastic!

“For Hindus there is eventually and ultimately only the Godhead. All will be subsumed into the Godhead. There will be no more Swami, me, only the Godhead.

“For Christians, as Brother Francis said so well, individual identity continues, thus there is still some form of duality—difference between God and you.” For us, there is only the non-dual—one Godhead.”

“Wow, that really helps. Thanks to you both. What I find especially wonderful is that even though there are some theological differences between you two, there is a common bond that is very deep and respectful. That is the sort of attitude which could end wars!”

“Nicely put, Andre,” said the young man’s friend. “So many of the Hindu and Christian saints, along with wonderful people from many other religions, spent their lives trying to bridge that gap. We will be visiting the ashram of a Benedictine monk Bede Griffiths, and see a wonderful example of that being lived out among us today.”

The Swami beamed. “Yes, this is the way religion is supposed to be, I believe.” None of our founders wanted conflict. They all strove for peace and harmony. Of course, there will always be some misunderstanding, but it does not have to lead to hate and war.

“Our problems come largely from an attachment to form—something the wave and the ocean does not have. Attachment to *anything* limits our freedom. The Christian mystics speak quite a bit about this. They even caution us not to become attached to our experiences in prayer and meditation. But then, your monk friend knows more about that than I do.”

## CHAPTER 10

After their two day respite from their flights it was time for the bus ride to Dharmasala—north India—the land of the Tibetan refugees and the Dalai Lama.

Andre and Brother Francis careened through the streets of Delhi in a taxi. Vehicles of every size, some motorized and some pedaled, swirled all around them. They could do nothing but laugh and pray for a safe landing at the bus station.

In the midst of this vehicular chaos they whizzed by a small Hindu street shrine. The taxi driver, to the amazement of the two friends, took his hands completely off the steering wheel and clasped them in a prayer position, palm to palm above his head, for a few seconds while closing his eyes! Perhaps it was the prayer that saved them from the many possible collisions which could have easily taken place.

They made it to the bus station in one piece, paid the driver, and breathed a sigh of relief. There appeared to be monkeys everywhere. They were larger and less cuddly

than one sees in the movies or on the television. Having survived Delhi traffic and a gaggle of monkeys, the pair flopped down on chairs inside the bus station to wait for the bus which just about everyone on the planet told them not to take.

A Tibetan Buddhist nun, clearly a Westerner, smiled at them. The three began to chat. She was from Australia originally but had lived in a monastery in Dharmsala for about twenty years at this point.

She helped her fellow travelers solve the riddle of the many cautions about the bus to Dharmsala.

“You see, it’s just that it takes much longer than the train and the springs on the bus are not always very good. Also, it requires an overnight trip through some very dark and desolate places.”

“Permit me to ask,” questioned Andre, “why *you* didn’t take the train then.”

She smiled understandingly. “You see, one has to get off the train at a very dark station late at night and transfer to a bus for the last leg of the journey. If I were traveling with others I would be on the train, not the bus. Anyway, I’m glad for the opportunity the bus has given me to speak with you fine folks.”

It was time to board. They managed to purchase three ice cream cones on the way to the bus, which was parked up the street about a block or so away from the station, on a larger road. In they piled, Brother Francis and Andre taking whatever seats seemed appealing, only to be moved later because there were assigned seats.

It was five in the afternoon by now and it would be seven or eight in the morning by the time they reached that part of the world where the Dalai Lama maintains his headquarters in exile.

Andre tried to tilt his seat back a little. It didn’t budge. He fooled with it. He started to mumble. All at once the back of his seat flew backwards into the lap of the Tibetan lady behind him. She smiled sweetly but must have been in pain. One could imagine her praying to the Medicine Buddha for a healing.

Brother Francis put on his headphones. Here at what is known as the “Top of the World,” the songs of Anne Murray gave him comfort. His knees banged against the seat in front of him periodically. Which would go first, his knees, the “shocks” on the bus, or his morale? “None of the above” was the answer he chose while drawing upon all the Salesian optimism he could muster.

All things considered, the ride was fine. The two travelers were a grateful pair and happy for the opportunity to be on this adventure. A beautiful Tibetan baby boy slept peacefully next to his mother on the seats in front of them. Darkness descended—totally.

The bus stopped for their first real break at about midnight. There was an area illuminated by strings of clear light bulbs supported on poles around the perimeter of what looked like a large parking lot. At the far end was a long counter with people making all sorts of tasty dishes.

Brother Francis could eat the Tibetan food, not the Indian, and this open air establishment had some of both. All of the travelers on the bus seemed to enjoy the break and ate heartily. The ride stirred up their appetites and the night air stimulated their taste buds as well.

Back in the “bus from hell,” as Andre had dubbed it, most of the riders fell into a light sleep. The baby in front never stirred.

After several hours it was time for a bathroom break. The bus stopped and it was anyone's guess where the bathrooms were. It turned out that the 'ladies room' was on one side of the bus and the 'men's room' was on the other side of the bus.

As they were re-entering the bus a large truck pulled up and stopped by the side of the road. There was a lot of yelling and a young man was swatted with a stick several times by the driver of the truck while his assistant watched. It appeared that someone had stowed away in the truck for a ride but was caught.

No lawyers, no media, no fine—just being chased away with a stick. The scene was painful to see and to hear. Brother Francis prayed for world peace, and for human rights for all, and renewed his vow to serve God and humanity as best he could, knowing that his small offering was far from perfect but was nonetheless blessed by God.

They rode on in a dark stupor. At one point, like a vision in the night, there appeared a brilliantly lighted white temple on their right. It was so large that they could see it coming long before they were along side it. The "vision" lasted for about five minutes. It seem to remind them that even in the darkness, a miracle of light awaits.

Andre broke the silence a while later. "This is getting old, Bro."

"So am I, *mon ami*."

"*Tres bien*. That's 'very good' in case that part of your old college French has not made its way back to the top of your memory.

"*Voila*, Andre. There is a hint of pink seeping through the inky blue sky. Can you see it?"

"Just about. I appreciate it when the people in my life point out the beauty around me.

"There is a little silver glint somewhere below, Brother, like a piece of Christmas tinsel. Can you see that?"

"Now that you mention it, Andre, I can just make it out. This reminds me a little of the process of spiritual direction--one person helping another to see the sacred in his or her life."

"Nice analogy my friend. Soon it will be dawn."

The pair drifted into a contemplative silence. The pink in the sky grew more and more all encompassing. Green valleys decorated with silver slivers of water abounded under, over, around and through them. They had made it through the night!

The bus stopped.

"We must be here, Brother."

"Not yet," the lady in the seat behind them said. "Our stop is the end of the line, about another hour from here."

The two friends tried to let go of their attachment to wanting the ride to be over. Before they knew it, it was.

## CHAPER 11

The next morning, after Office and meditation, the community washed up the breakfast dishes and replaced the cereal boxes in the cupboard under the sink. There was a distinct air of unease among them all.

“Maybe I’m getting old, but I felt a strange presence here last night. I don’t know quite how to explain it,” Sister Scholastica continued softly, “but it was as if another person was among us. I did not *see* anyone, however, only felt a presence.”

Brother Matthew tried to lighten the atmosphere. “You’re not *getting* old, Sister, you *are* old!” Sorry, I know you have a good sense of humor, albeit a subtle one, and I couldn’t resist.”

“She’s only middle-aged,” added Brother Benedict with his usually raspy voice. “Now if you’re talking old, I’m ‘Exhibit A’ don’t you think?”

“You’ve been old since you’ve been born, I think, Brother. It’s just your personality. Sister Scholastica, on the other hand, seems to be someone who is interested in figuring things out, trying new things. For her, age seems only to be a number. She seems forever young.”

Brother Matthew fell into a brief silence, hoping that his little burst of extraversion didn’t offend anyone. No one seemed so. Sometimes their communal deference for one another became a little strained and some honest sharing of viewpoints was helpful. Now was simply one of those times.

Anthony, still navigating his way through the verbal and non-verbal style of interaction among the members of the monastic community, gathered his courage and dove into the discussion.

“Sisters and Brothers, I sleep like a log so I was not aware of anything unusual going on last evening, but find the paranormal a fascinating topic. Did anyone else sense a presence, to put it in Sister Scholastica’s words, last evening?” His dark eyes blazed with curiosity.

Sister Jane de Chantal, probably the most reserved member of the little group, contributed to the conversation next. “I normally sleep well but I slept lightly last night. Something seemed to keep waking me up—not a sound or a presence—just a something that I can’t explain.”

“We are good detectives, especially when we work as a group. We can solve this mystery,” added Brother Benedict. “Of course our most risk-taking sleuth is in India at the moment but maybe we can call in his mystery-solving friends if necessary.”

Sister Scholastica mentally prayed for charity as she thought about the sometimes impulsive nature of Brother Benedict. *Bless him, change me.* That little prayer always helped her to laugh at life’s little annoyances and keep the little things little.

“If it comes to that I suppose we can, Brother. At the moment, however, our vague musings about a presence in our midst is probably not enough to bother a forensic psychologist and a detective about.”

“Humph,” was the older monk’s response.

“Looks like you are getting to see our human side, Anthony,” quipped Brother Matthew. “That’s what Observership is for. It will help you get to know us better, and we you.”

“You folks are all so nice. A little bit of sparring is normal, as I see things,” he responded. “One of the many things that attracted me to your community is your humanity. You are very practical and simple people. God is found in the ordinary, and even behind the scenes, in Salesian spirituality. Isn’t that right?”

“You are on the same page as the rest of us,” announced Brother Benedict. “It’s time to make him a Postulant!”

“Not so fast Brother,” Sister Jane de Chantal countered. “We need to wait for Anthony’s one-month Observership to be completed and for our Abbot to return to take a step like that.”

“I know that, Sister,” I was just kidding.

The group dispersed and the monastics went about the various tasks assigned them. Sister Jane de Chantal settled in at the big desk in the monastery community room. The top of the desk, while not in *complete* disarray, was cluttered with papers. The nun began straightening things out, putting things into orderly piles and filing away what was not needed at the moment.

During the course of the morning work period the Prioress became uneasy. Sister Jane de Chantal was in charge of the community while Abbot Francis was away.

*All that talk after breakfast. My mind must be playing tricks on me. I can't put my finger on it, but it feels like someone has been searching through this desk. There is just enough clutter on the desk and in the drawers to make it hard to discern, but some things appear to have been moved. Then again, maybe not.*

Brother Matthew walked by with a mop in his long-boned fingers.

“Brother, would you have had reason to search through this desk recently?”

“Me, Sister? No, I never even go near it. I’m still the new kid on the block and try to mind my own business. That’s more than enough of a task for me. Why do you ask?”

“Oh it’s probably just the ‘presence’ people were talking about after breakfast, but it seems that someone has moved some of the contents of the desk.”

“It probably is just the aftermath of our breakfast conversation, Sister. How could one even notice changes in the contents of that big old desk? It has everything from bills to shipping envelopes for the books and tapes we peddle—I mean make available to others—in or on it.”

“I suppose you are right, Brother. Still...”

“Oh, oh, here we go again, another mystery! I *love* them, especially when I am not the main character,” the young monk said with a smile.

“Better not say anything to the others, Brother Matthew. I don’t want to create an atmosphere of paranoia in the community.”

“Of course, Sister, you are the Prioress, and I happily obey. If I can be of any help feel free to let me know. Otherwise, the kitchen floor awaits!” He walked off with his usual air of good-natured humor and generosity.

## CHAPTER 12

“We can slip in one more game of Uno before the bell rings for Night Prayer and Grand Silence,” said Sister Scholastica as she deftly shuffled the black and white cards that were used for playing the card game.

The goal of the game was to have as few points as possible when the game ended. Saint Ignatius Loyola encouraged people to see everything in life as a gift, so when one player caused another player to accrue extra points, someone in the group often said: “All is gift” as everyone but the “victim” laughed heartily.

After “gifting” one another many times over, the bell outside the Oratory rang and the group peacefully and silently put the cards away and made their way outside to the little Oratory where they would chant their Night Prayer in the glow of candle light.

At the very end of the service Brother Benedict lit the small clear vigil light in front of the icon of the Blessed Mother and Sister Jane de Chantal intoned the final communal prayer of the day, the Marian Anthem, which at this time of the liturgical year, was the *Salve Regina*, or Hail Holy Queen. Though now chanted in English rather than Latin, the ancient Gregorian melody was retained. Though some of the words were antiquated and harsh, it captures the reality of the light and darkness of life, which for the Christian, always ends in Light.

Mary we greet you, mother and queen all merciful;  
Our life, our sweetness, and our hope we hail you.  
To you we exiles, children of Eve, lift our crying,  
To you we send our sighs as mourning and weeping  
We pass through this vale of sorrow.  
Haste then we pray, O our intercessor, look with pity,  
With eyes of love compassionate, upon us sinners,  
And after, when this earthly exile shall be ended,  
Show us your womb’s most blessed fruit, your Jesus.  
O clement, O loving, O most sweet, Virgin Mary.

All was quite. The little boy appeared. His parents didn’t even know that he was out of the house, and the monastic community—wrapped in their Grand Silence—did not know that he was among them either. Gentle of step and quiet of spirit, the Little One seemed to fit into the atmosphere of the monastery on an ethereal plane.

*I know that I’m only eleven years old, but I can do a lot. People tend to ignore me but I’ll show them a thing or two. Just look at these flowers. I think grown ups call them “mums.” Here they are sitting outside the garage in pots. I bet the monks and nuns are going to plant them.*

*They’re not too heavy, and this purple one looks so happy. Wonder where they want them. That little hill by the steps looks like its been weeded. Maybe I’ll put one in there. I know right where to go to find something to dig with. Better make it a little shovel. Might get caught with a big one.*

The moon was full and bright as the Little One worked. He dug slowly and quietly and held his breath when the short shovel, normally kept in the trunk of a community car for digging out of a snow drift, scraped a rock in the earth now and then.

*There. That looks good. Now what about this yellow one. Hmmmm. Maybe I’ll plant it in front of the great big cross they light up at night. Glad it’s not lit now.*

The dark-haired Little One slipped across the driveway to the corner of the property which formed a natural alcove in the earth, with a wall of ground to the right and in back. The rest of the space was open and blended into the acre and a third of grounds making up the monastery property.

*His hands were very strong but the earth was hard and rocky. The Little One didn’t think he could finish the job. Just then a dog barked, and then bounded out of the*

*brush. The Little One shooed him away with his shovel. Fortunately the dog was very tame and ran off.*

The gardener held his breath. *Was anyone coming?* After five quiet minutes he continued digging. This time it took longer to dig and plant because of the harder soil but he did it. One orange colored mum plant with tight buds glowed in the silver of the moonlight.

He tiptoed back to the garage area. *This one looks like the rust on my bike. Do they think this one is pretty? Grownups! I'll put this one out front over the septic tank opening.*

The digging went very easily this time. Encouraged by his success, the Little One planted one final mum, a refreshing looking white one, to the left of the porch steps for all to see as they entered or exited the main building.

*There, I helped them out. Now I'd better go. Something tells me that other people creep around here at night also. I don't want to get caught by the monks and nuns who live here or even by those who intrude.*

*Now I have to risk going back inside again. Glad I found that spare key they give to guests. I hope that I can get this little red plastic shovel back into the garage without waking anybody up. The steps to the downstairs do creak some but I'm pretty light. I got it out; I can get it back in.*

One loud creak froze him in his tracks. He thought that he heard someone mumble.

*Maybe it's just someone turning over while sleeping. Mission accomplished! Now I'd better get out of here while I still can.*

With that, the Little One disappeared.

## CHAPTER 13

Andre and Brother Francis emerged from the long overnight bus ride from Delhi a little bit achy, tired, and bedraggled, but all the same in good spirits. Their senses were immediately assaulted by a crowd of people—beggars and other folks busily going about the duties of their day.

“No money, milk, no money, milk,” a girl of about nine years of age with dirt marks on her face and matted dark hair kept chanting. She held out her right palm toward those disembarking from the bus as she clutched an infant of about six months of age to her left shoulder.

The travelers struggled with their feelings, knowing that the poor and not so poor would seek them out. They had agreed to wait until their last day in an area to give alms to the poor, and then to do so generously. If they started now, they would never be left alone and their money would soon be gone.

The Christian monk and his companion walked quickly along a mountain ridge, rolling their suitcases after them. After about a mile they came to what the local people called “The Dalai Lama’s temple.” Once there, they asked directions to the rooming house where they had made arrangements to lodge via the Internet. They pushed themselves up a hill about a quarter of a mile and the rooming house was there on their right.

Once inside the gate a warm and welcoming man showed them to the last room along a “U” shaped balcony of about a dozen rooms. The view was breathtaking. The rich green vibration of miles and miles of trees invited them to rest. In the background the sounds of Tibetan monks chanting wafted in the air.

Although it was only about nine in the morning, the two flopped on their twin beds, not even bothering to lock the door or draw the clean but slightly tattered blue drapes.

They awoke in the dark to sprays of water and howling winds. Most of the hinged windows would not shut tightly and banged against the window frames.

“I thought we were near the *top* of the world, not the *end* of the world,” said Andre as he got up to try once again to jam the windows into a closed position.

“Maybe just moving your bed away from the window is the more practical solution,” suggested his monk friend.

They drifted into semi-consciousness.

A crash and a slam louder and closer than the thunder startled Brother Francis out of his feeble sleep.

“I just saw the biggest spider I’ve ever seen in my life,” yelled Andre. “It’s in the bathroom so I just locked it in.”

“Are we talking big as in old Japanese movies where a large insect demolishes houses that look like they are on a Christmas train platform?”

“Not that big Bro, but much more real and *very* fuzzy!”

“Great! Now we can go spider hunting in the middle of the night. It’s something I’ve always wanted to do!”

“I’ll get the trash basket and you get that dinner plate we carried our food in here with during our momentary awakening earlier this evening,” the younger man said.

“Then what?”

“I’ll slide that big bolt on the bathroom door to the right and we can go in. I can’t imagine why they have a bolt on the *outside* of a bathroom door, but they do.”

“Maybe it’s used to lock spiders in,” joked the middle-aged and still very tired monk.

They unlocked the door and immediately observed the spider, about four inches wide, clinging to the wall next to the mirror over the sink.

“I’ll put this plastic trash basket under “Brother Spider” and you knock him—or her—into the basket, okay Brother?”

“Anything to get some more sleep.”

It all happened in a split second. They captured the spider in the blue plastic trash container and used the white plastic dinner plate as a lid.

Out they went into the storm and on to the balcony. In their struggle to extricate the spider from its new-found home, the spider, trash basket, and plate all went over the balcony into the darkness, crashing on the flagstones below them.

“Let’s get out of here before someone finds out who is causing all of the racket,” Andre yelled above the storm.

“Glaaaadly.”

Back into their room they ran and locked the door behind them, almost slipping in the puddle the rain made in their little dwelling through a slight opening at the bottom of the door.

Deep sleep, partially induced by the rhythm of the falling raindrops, followed.

## CHAPTER 14

Andre woke up in time to watch the blazing sun rise up over the mountain range. He couldn't get out of the balcony of rooms and on to the road leading up and down them mountainside. A large heavy metal gate had been pulled over the entrance and padlocked at dusk.

The young naturopathic medical student quietly sat back on a rickety old wooden prayer bench and meditated. Although about an hour had passed, it felt like time had been suspended for him. When he opened his eyes again, the sun was shining brightly on the various shades of green regaling the mountains and the gate had been unlocked and pulled aside for the day.

Certain that Brother Francis was in their room meditating, he made his way across the road and into a beautiful rock garden surrounding a small hotel. It housed a nice restaurant and even a "Cyber Yak Café" which he could use to access the internet and check his e-mails.

Andre wondered about what mountain range surrounded them. While waiting for his traveling companion to join him for breakfast, he found the Cyber Yak Café on the second floor of the well-kept hotel and logged on. Andre typed in "Dalai Lama temple Dharamsala" and multiple "hits" filled the computer screen. He clicked and found exactly the information he was looking for—the name of the mountain range—plus more, complete with British spelling.

"Set against the backdrop of the dramatic Dhauladhar mountains, Dharamsala is perched on the high slopes in the upper reaches of Kangra Valley. The town is divided into two distinct and widely separated sections, Upper and Lower Dharamsala, which differ almost a thousand metres in height.

"Today, Dharamsala has become synonymous to the Tibetan government in exile and the home of Tibetan leader Dalai Lama. Even if the Tibetan community dominates the town, still it has retained the colonial lifestyle and British fervour.

"Dharamsala overlooks the plains and is surrounded by dense pine trees and Deodar forests. A nearby snowline with numerous streams and cool healthy atmosphere makes the surroundings very attractive.

"Dharamsala is a busy bazaar town and has established itself as the travellers base camp, who come to explore the nearby mountains. The Kotwali Bazaar provides the entire colour and characteristic of a small town, which is mixed with the simple life style.

"The colourful temple and Gompas, which reflect the culture of Tibet, adds attraction for the visitor. The Kangra museum gives an overview of the rich past of the region and on the other hand there are institutes that have been established to preserve the Tibetan art, cultures and traditions."

Next he typed in "gompa" and found out that this is a Tibetan word meaning monastery. Andre looked at his watch. It didn't help him much. He had not changed the

time since he left Montreal. A large round clock on the wall above the two-computer table told him it was almost seven-thirty in the morning.

He made his way downstairs to the wooden-floored breakfast room. The sun was shining merrily into the spacious chamber. The six foot square wooden tables were placed at angles to one another and a small vase of wild flowers added a touch of warmth to the already inviting atmosphere.

Brother Francis was at a small table by a side window contentedly sipping herb tea. “Top of the morning to you, Bro, as they say in Tibetan. Are you ready to face the day?”

“As long as it’s calmer than last night, I am,” the monk retorted with a smile.

“Our monastic guides have us all set up to go to Chinmayananda Ashram. It’s about an hour from here in one of the little taxis that play ‘chicken’ with one another along the roads.”

“Swami Chinmayananda, I remember now,” said the monk reflectively. “He was Swami Dayananda’s teacher. Swami D. founded the ashram near our monastery in Pennsylvania. I’ve been there so many times and always feel welcome. I even use the place to teach qigong in. My students love it! The ashram is clean, welcoming, prayerful, and serves us an Indian vegetarian lunch when I hire the facilities for teaching.”

“I remember and I’d love to see it one day, Brother. In the meanwhile we can visit the place that parented the Pennsylvania ashram, so to speak. I’ve been thinking a lot about lineage recently, you know, in preparing for this trip. It seems to me that lineage, or a genetic or spiritual family tree, is more important than I used to think it was.”

“I think it is too, Andre. In addition to my wonderful earthly family, I have a spiritual lineage as well. Saint Francis de Sales and Saint Jane de Chantal are my spiritual parents and connect me with branches of our spiritual family throughout the world. Even when I initially meet someone who follows Salesian spirituality, there is an instant connection.”

“That is something I would love to experience, Brother Francis. I too have a wonderful ‘earthly’ family, as you put it. I am also starting to feel a connection to the lineage of the qigong masters I’ve studied with, but it’s not as deep as yours seems to be.”

“Well, I’ve been living some form of the Salesian life since I was seventeen years old so I suppose the bond has grown pretty strong. Not that it has all been fun. Some of my spiritual brothers and sisters have not been easy to deal with. I’m sure that I’ve been a thorn in the side of a few folks along the way as well. Thank God for the ability to forgive oneself and others and move on. Without that we are sunk.”

“Is that what you mean by ‘reconciliation?’ I know that Confession is now called the Sacrament of Reconciliation. It seems to me that you are talking about something broader than that, though.”

“Right again, my friend. The spirit of reconciliation needs to pervade all of life, I believe, in order to transform the world. If we are not given, or eventually choose for ourselves, a new beginning, then there is little hope. People in Twelve Step programs, those recovering from alcohol, drugs, sex, or gambling addictions, are like people reborn.

I've seen it so many times in my clinical practice. 'Recovering' people are often deeply spiritual folks. End of homily."

The traveling companions ate their breakfasts and walked out into the bright sunlight. After cleaning up in their room and opening all the windows in an effort to dry things out, they padlocked their door according to custom and hopped into a little red cab.

In about an hour they were parked outside a beautiful parcel of land dotted with numerous buildings, each about three stories high. The guestmaster welcomed them warmly, in typical Hindu style.

First they took off their shoes and entered the temple.

## CHAPTER 15

Oil lamps flickered in the gentle breeze. Small mounds of fruit and flower petals sat in reverent offering before the images of a God who manifests in many forms and about whom seemingly endless stories have been transcribed.

After a refreshing period of meditation the trio left the temple and made their way to a vocational school run by the Chinmayananda ashram. Perhaps the most fascinating part of their tour of the vocational school was observing the greeting card cottage industry taking place there.

A wide assortment of delicately drawn greeting cards, with warm and caring verses printed inside, were being packaged in lots of twelve into plastic bags. These packets would then be sent to various shops for sale. Through projects such as this the ashram was able to run the vocational school.

This project was completely run by hearing impaired young adults. The rooms where all of this took place were almost completely silent on a verbal level. Non-verbally, however, the atmosphere was crackling with lively communication. A young Indian woman with sparkling intelligent eyes invited the visitors to sit on the ground and to become part of them, so to speak, with a welcoming wave of her hand.

About fifteen young and energetic workers were scattered on the floor in what looked like random fashion. Their work, however, was anything but random. Several of the workers collated the cards and envelopes and then handed them on to someone nearby who put the cards into plastic bags. Other workers collected the packaged materials, then quickly but carefully placed them into large cardboard cartons for shipping.

Brother Francis and Andre missed some of the humor, but from time to time one or another of the vocational school students would make a motion or give a look. Others would smile and laugh in response, sometimes audibly, sometimes not.

Francis reflected back on his communications studies from grad school. About eighty percent of communication is not spoken verbally he remembered hearing somewhere.

*The largest part of communication is non-verbal. What is transmitted and received between the lines is really the message. Our own patron, Saint Francis de Sales, is patron of the hearing impaired. What was that incident? Now I remember. Francis de Sales took a young hearing impaired man into his home and made up a sign language so that they could communicate. Then he gave him a job helping around his home. Such a simple thing to do on one level, yet it profoundly changed the life of that young man.*

*In community we get to sense the moods of others, as well as their very presence or absence in a room. "Jesus, the Gospel tells us that you read the hearts of us humans. That is certainly a non-verbal experience." I suppose much of the spiritual life is non-verbal. I deal with so many words in my clinical practice. Many are spoken and quite a few are written. Help me to keep the non-verbal primary, Jesus. It is when I listen on that level that real healing takes place.*

*How many times have I not known what to say to a suffering person? When I have the presence of mind to shut up and listen with my heart, things change. I don't need to prod or suggest, just hear. "You are the healer, Jesus. Thanks for being the fire within all I do. Protect all those who minister to others personally or professionally from burn out."*

"What's up, Brother Francis, you seem to have drifted off?"

"Sorry, Andre. I was just musing over things. We are so fortunate to have our senses, aren't we?"

"Yes Brother, and I hope that I never take them for granted again."

With that the guest master stood up and waved good bye to the group, which was the cue for the two travelers to do so also. It was hard for them to leave the greeting card workers. There was something so authentic about them.

They made their way to another huge section of the room and through a sea of looms where young women were weaving rugs and cloth. Francis went into another reverie.

*They called the crossed fibers "warp and woof." The beauty of the completed fabric comes from the combination of threads which crisscross. So it is the quality of the threads which really make up the final product. Each word, action, and thought, are threads which create our lives. "Help me, Jesus, to create life-giving threads and not tangles in the minds of others or in my own mind."*

*There are so many on the streets of India in tattered clothing. It's dull and drab, downright dirty in places. Yet their smiles are wonderful. Yes, there is real pain and anger here, but some manage to find deeper meaning in life than clothing, or even the ability to use their senses. "I am grateful for so much, Jesus. Help me to continue to be grateful, and may my gratitude grow stronger and be expressed by the way I live and the way I treat the people whom I serve."*

"Earth to Brother Francis, are you there?"

"Thanks again Andre. I must not be very good company today. I keep lapsing into daydreams."

Andre laughed out loud. "I very much doubt that you are daydreaming, my brother. I think I know you well enough to understand that you are moving into periods of spontaneous prayer and meditation at those times. Am I right?"

"I suppose so, Andre. So often we get very formal and proper about prayer, yet we teach that it is supposed to be like a conversation with a good friend. So yes, and thanks for pointing it out to me. This is just one more reason to be grateful. You are a pretty good reader of the non-verbal, Andre."

*"Mais oui! I've been taught by the very best."*

The Hindu guest master was a very astute man. He had been observing the North American friends since he welcomed them to the ashram a few hours prior.

“We are all one. The same *atman*, the same spirit of God, is in us all, and you two have a way of seeing that, even beyond the confines of cultures and nations. You are both very blessed indeed. Please forgive me if I’ve spoken out of turn.”

The three men bowed to one another with smiles on their faces, then spontaneously hugged. The card packers and rug weavers clapped their hands in front of their shiny eyes. This is the sort of thing which could remove bigotry and intolerance from the world forever.

## CHAPTER 16

“The mums look great; who planted them?” asked Anthony over the roar of the hot dishwater pouring into the sink while creating clouds of smoke and suds. The new Observer was becoming more a member of the community with each passing day.

“What mums?” responded Sister Scholastica with a delayed smile. “I sound like someone in an old vaudeville skit—not that I am old enough to remember vaudeville! You know, what I just said sounds something like a ‘knock knock’ joke.”

“We’re losing you Sister, better just answer the question, or quit before you are in over your head,” Brother Benedict commented.

“I didn’t know we had mums, much less who planted them, and was just kidding around. Just trying to lighten up the atmosphere. Anyone else know about the mums?”

“I picked them up at Chestnut Hill Nursery,” Brother Benedict continued. “I was going to plant them myself but I suppose someone thinks I’m getting too old for that sort of thing.”

Everyone became a bit pensive. Brother Benedict appeared offended that someone helped him out with his project. More confusing to the group was the fact that no one seemed to know who did it.

“Well, who is the mystery helper who’s sending me off to the glue factory?”

Brother Matthew had a way of easing tension; it was a genuine part of his personality. “I’m sure whoever did it simply wanted to help out, Brother. Who planted the flowers, by the way?” The younger monk looked around the room.

No one moved or answered. Everyone felt a little strange.

“This is ridiculous,” interjected Sister Jane de Chantal forcefully. “What are these non-verbal messages we are passing to one another? I’ll make mine verbal. I didn’t know we had mums and I didn’t plant them. If I did I would have asked Brother Benedict, or whoever purchased them for the community, first. Mystery solved!”

“Not quite, Sister,” whispered Sister Scholastica absent-mindedly. “We still don’t know who planted them.”

“Rubbish! Maybe a neighbor wanted to do us a good turn,” retorted Sister Jane de Chantal.

“I think they would have asked us first,” said Sister Scholastica, more to herself than to anyone else.

“While we are on the subject of mysteries, Sisters and Brothers, did anyone hear someone creeping around during the night? Maybe I was just having bad dreams, but I sensed a presence in the monastery that was not here during the day.”

“Anthony, don’t you start too! You’ll have us all ‘creeped out’ as the young people say,” responded Sister Jane de Chantal, and not in her usual kindly voice.

“Certainly Sister, please forget I said anything.”

“Please forget that I said what I did too, Anthony. You are good to bring up your concerns to the community. We need to communicate and I didn’t mean to stifle your contribution.

“It’s just that we’ve all been a little edgy of late and I’m trying to keep that from escalating. I must admit that I sense something too. Unfortunately, that’s how some of our past community adventures, or ‘misadventures’ began in the past.” Sister Jane de Chantal felt better for having shared what was really on her mind.

“Let’s change the subject, shall we?” invited Brother Matthew. “Has anyone seen the package of sandalwood incense sticks that we keep in the Oratory? I can’t find them anywhere.”

No one answered. Everyone drifted off to his or her duties of the day.

## CHAPTER 17

The Tibetan Buddhist monk whose turn it was to guide Brother Francis and Andre looked somewhat bedraggled. They were not supposed to play “football” at the monastery for some reason; perhaps monastic decorum or some related rule was broken in the process. It wasn’t really football anyway, but what Westerners would call “soccer.”

Their football adventures went something like this: The monks simply put their play clothes on under their maroon monastic robes and walked out into an open field beyond the monastery property. They disrobed and played up a storm, then robed again and walked back to the monastery.

“Looks like it was a football day,” Andre whispered to Brother Francis.

“Appears so, and I think his team lost!”

Even though it was late morning at this point, Francis felt like it was mid-afternoon and time for a siesta. He woke up spontaneously at three o’clock that morning, so he showered and shaved, and then celebrated the Offices of Vigils and Morning Prayer on the balcony outside the guest rooms below the snow-capped mountains towering in front of him. The whole experience filled him with wonder—wonder at just being in Tibet.

The trio walked to Men-Tsee-Khang Hospital. They took a short cut, which meant that they stumbled down-hill over rocks, trudged back up-hill again, stuck their feet into holes in the earth now and then, and worked up a sweat. No need to exercise later—always a silver lining if one looks hard enough. Sometimes they would meet others on a shortcut and be comfortable enough to chat with them like long-lost friends, say good bye eventually, and probably never see them again in this life.

The medical museum at the hospital housed a variety of ancient medical instruments. Most of them appeared to be made of brass. A few looked fairly frightening. The bookstore housed a wonderful collection of Tibetan medical texts. The doctor monk purchased a few more books by Doctor Yeshe Dhonden, the Tibetan doctor monk who was formerly the physician to the Dalai Lama, to add to his library.

Both Andre and Brother Francis enjoyed good health but wanted the experience of a Tibetan medical examination and clinical treatment. They had their pulses read in Tibetan fashion. Brother Francis was told that his “kidney fire” was low and was given a prescription for some pills. His low kidney fire was simply the result of strenuous travel and nothing to be concerned about.

Andre was given a prescription to help his digestion, another little side effect of travel. Otherwise, he was fine, bursting with energy. Brother Francis thought of the old Mark Twain quote: “The only trouble with youth is that it is wasted on the young.”

The pharmacists in the dispensary were more interested in the “photo op” with the Westerners than in filling the prescriptions but they happily complied after their pictures were taken.

The pills were about half the size of malted milk balls and had to be crushed before consuming. They tasted a bit like sawdust. One might suppose enough sawdust would ignite anyone’s kidney fire! The travelers had great respect for Tibetan medicine but enjoyed laughing at themselves and joking over their experiences.

The next stop was at the main library in Dharmasala. To the surprise of the travelers, the man who manages their rooming house was there, dressed in a suit, and showing folks around the library and explaining Tibetan texts to visitors. The last he was seen was earlier that morning on the roof of their building fixing something. What a versatile gentleman.

We were taken beyond a locked door and shown ancient volumes, many of which were smuggled out of Tibet. Texts older than the Bible were in our hands. God was revealed to these good people in another language and another culture but they were loved just the same as we are loved.

Brother Francis reflected on the Buddhist emphasis on developing compassion for all sentient beings. All of life is sacred to them; that is why so many Buddhists are vegetarians. Their compassion comes across as very Christ-like. Many of the folks he met on this journey were gently strong, a foundational tenet of Salesian spirituality.

Very close to the library was another large monastery. It was the former home of our guides. They were transferred to their present monastery to be assistants to the new Abbot of that monastery, on the grounds of which the Dalai Lama has a little house and the temple in which he teaches. The trio had a quite moment, and a look of homesickness briefly washed over the face of their monastic guide, then it vanished and his electric smile returned.

After huddling around a small table in a local shop and sipping tea, the trio returned to the rooming house. Brother Francis and Andre rested and then had a late dinner and early sleep. Tomorrow they were scheduled to have a private audience with the Abbot of the monastery next door, at the temple of the Dalai Lama.

## CHAPTER 18

Security was very tight as the two traveling friends approached the temple. A line of Tibetans snaked down the steps and into the pathway between the buildings towering on either side of the crowd. The line moved swiftly and the quartet of uniformed security guards operating the metal detectors were courteous.

“What’s happening?” queried Andre.

“His Holiness is having one of his periodic audiences for newly arrived Tibetans. No Westerners are allowed in today. We are very sorry.”

“Andre and I have an audience with the Abbot of this monastery today. It is scheduled for eleven o’clock this morning,” added Brother Francis.

“This group will be disbursing about fifteen minutes prior to that, sir. You would do best to return at that time.” The guards were busy and moved on with their work of monitoring the faithful with the help of electronic equipment attached to large metal frames that the faithful were passing through on their way to see the Dalai Lama.

“That gives us a few hours to meditate, read, and rest, Brother.”

“Sounds great to me, Andre.”

The couple made their way back to the temple at the appointed time. The temple was still crowded, and the overflow of people were sitting at the large low open windows and looking in or listening as intently as possible.

One of the guards spoke. “If you get rid of your cameras and step through this electronic device and stand right there, His Holiness will walk right by you in just a minute.”

The travelers stashed their photo equipment under a bench and zipped through the metal detectors. They stood just a few yards away from the metal frame they passed through but now on the other side of it.

“That was easier than in the airport, Bro.”

“I know, and we didn’t even have to take off our sandals or belts!”

With that the atmosphere shifted. The Dalai Lama must have exited the temple from a side door and was now passing directly in front of the travelers across the outside back of the temple, where a throng of admirers stood behind a long metal railing. Brother Francis’ hazel eyes were riveted upon this great spiritual leader who, in Francis’ opinion, had the courage to practice what he preached—courageous non-violence in response to violence.

His Holiness radiated peace and beamed at Andre and Brother Francis. It was as if he was telling them that he understood their support and was grateful for it. He stopped a few yards away and began blessing the people and offering them small sacred objects.

It was a timeless moment. If there was any noise, the two Westerners did not hear it. It was truly a group altered state of consciousness. In the midst of a part of the world filled with poverty and pain, surrounded by refugees, there was total peace.

“I have never experienced a field of qi like that before, Andre. Have you?”

“No Brother Francis. Actually, as much as I work with the life-force and respect it, I never thought such an experience was possible.”

“Nor I my friend. God was with us in a most palpable way. All is gift.”

The crowd was disbursing and the security guards directed the two travelers to the room of the Abbot. The two monastic guides were waiting and ushered them into a small room where a large man in his seventies was sitting crossed legged on a home made platform bed softened by a mat—which didn’t look all that thick.

The Abbot welcomed all four men warmly, and extended his hand in blessing to the two Westerners.

“Christians take refuge in Christ. We Buddhists take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. There have been and are many Buddhas. In fact, we believe that we are all on the way to Buddhahood, or Enlightenment. Dharma literally means protection and is actually the teaching of the Buddha which we try to put into practice. Sangha means spiritual community. That community might live under the same roof or separately.”

The Abbot continued sharing some of the basic tenets of Tibetan Buddhism while beaming brightly at his guests. Then he asked Brother Francis a question.

“I understand, Abbot Francis, that candidates for the Christian monastic life in the West must be very stringently assessed—psychological testing, interviews, and those sorts of things. Is that correct?”

“Yes it is Abbot. We are slow to admit people to monastic life, especially these days when life is so confusing for many. Most monasteries require some years of lived experience after schooling, or perhaps a college education first. Interviews, psychological assessment, and some live-in visits are typical also.”

The Abbot laughed heartily. “That is why you have so few monastics compared to us!”

Everyone enjoyed the interaction. Just before the quartet took their leave, Brother Francis spied some natural medications on a small and rickety night table next to the Abbot’s pallet. He asked if he might be of service as a naturopathic doctor.

The others left the room and Brother Francis examined the medicine. Some appeared appropriate, one was clearly an inferior product. He told the Abbot that he would send him a better quality of medicine in the mail.

The two monastics embraced and for that moment there was no East and West, Buddhist and Christian, war, poverty, illness, or anything of the sort. All was one.

“Why are you so quiet, Brother Francis?” asked Andre as they made their way back to the rooming house.

“I’m not completely sure myself, Andre. We have had several profound experiences this morning. I’m filled with gratitude, yet tinged with confusion over the world condition. My vocation as a monk and as one who is spending his life trying to funnel the healing love of God to others fills me with awe. My wonderful family and friends, such as yourself, are also a source of great awe and joy for me. Then again, maybe it’s just high altitude illness!”

“There you go again, Bro. Just when I get a glimpse into that simply complex heart of yours, you shift gears and make a joke.”

“I didn’t realize that I do that. If you would like to know anything about me please ask. I spend my everyday focusing on others and it is sometimes hard to speak more than listen.”

“I’m going to hold you to your word, even though I seem to have caught you at a vulnerable moment.”

## CHAPTER 19

*Night duty again. I’ll just snoop around the old monastery a bit and see what I come up with.*

She floated past the newly-planted mums, senses attuned to any possibility of the presence of another person. The community seemed more on edge these days. Maybe it was just her imagination, certainly not something she had done.

The trickle of a small fountain in the garden startled her into thinking someone else might be present. She had the intuitive sense that a little child was nearby, but how could that be? Others might be around also.

She was getting pretty good at finding her way around and triumphed over holding the keys to the main monastery building in her hands.

*The keys of the kingdom. I'll get in there this time and find the background I'm looking for. Some of the members of this community are pretty interesting characters. I'd love to know more about them so I can really get to know them.*

Leaves had fallen but, for the most part, were not at the point where they crackled under foot.

*A few small crunching sounds won't attract any attention, but that white metal screen door does squeak a little. Better be very careful.*

Ever so slowly she opened the screen door on the porch. It moved almost noiselessly and let her in to a foyer housing the red wooden door to the main house. The key slipped easily into the dead bolt and she turned it. This door *did* squeak. She held her breath. Nothing stirred.

*Didn't find any files here the last time but I couldn't find any in the Abbot's office either—not that I had much time to look. Had to get out too quickly.*

She rummaged around for a quarter of an hour but all she came up with was paperwork for monastery appliances, postal forms, and a schedule with dates and phone numbers for reaching the Abbot while he was traveling.

As her frustration grew, so did her assertiveness and risk-taking behavior. Not bothering to place everything back exactly as she found it, not really remembering just where every paper went anyway, she moved to the front door. In seconds she was outside and on her way to the Abbot's quarters.

Once inside the Hermitage she pulled on filing cabinet drawers to no avail. Irrationally, she only pulled harder on the drawers when they did not open.

*Calm down. Remain logical. All I need is a key to this filing cabinet. I'll bet anything it is in the desk, but I wonder if that is also locked.*

It was not! As she burrowed through the contents of the desk drawers in search of a key she came across some letters. They were opened flat as if to have them handy for reading or reference.

*Very interesting indeed. So that's the background of the person in question. Why did they take such a candidate? Numbers going into monastic life are dramatically down these days but this place seems to be content with a few dedicated folks. They can't be that desperate for members.*

She continued reading intently, illuminating the papers by the silver Maglite Brother Francis uses for patient exams. The light beam shook as she read.

*Wow! That hits close to home. I have a strange feeling that I've met this person before. Why do I know so much about the situation? My head is spinning. I may faint. I'd better get out of here before I do.*

She was completely unconcerned about being quiet now and moved quickly through the Hermitage, out the door, locking it behind her, and back to her hiding place.

The Little One saw *everything*. He had a way of blending into the background wherever he was. No one paid much attention to him but he paid attention to everyone and everything else. It was as if all his senses were quadruple in strength compared to the rest of the population.

*I hope she liked my flowers--and I hope that she found whatever she was looking for. She seemed to be happy about the papers she was reading. Grown ups! I don't understand why things written on paper are so important to them. After all, it's just paper.*

*Maybe when I grow up I will understand that and lots of other things, like why people mistreat one another. It makes you want to hide away somewhere.*

*I like the night. No one bothers you. Everyone is asleep and you don't have to put up with them.*

*Those ground hogs have dug more tunnels under the Oratory. I heard the monks and nuns complaining about hearing thumping during the praying of the Office. I guess the little critters were having a party under there.*

*I know that they are quiet during the winter. They must sleep or black out like I do or something. It won't be long before they do that again. Now I can help.*

*Lucky for me Brother Matthew left a shovel out, it's over there between the Oratory and the garage. I'll just fill in the tunnels.*

The Little One almost danced across the driveway, so happy was he to be helping out around the monastery. The shovel was taller than he was but it didn't stop him. He walked to the edge of the property, a small wooded strip between the monastery grounds and the road, and collected a shovel full of dirt.

He walked back to the Oratory and deposited the dirt soundlessly into a hole created by the ground hogs. It felt like a drop in the ocean but he kept at it. There were about seven tunnel entrances and it took the Little One several hours to fill in the holes working with one small shovel and no wheel barrow.

At last the job was completed. He saw an edge of red coming up over the Pocono Mountains.

*I'd better get out of here before I'm discovered.* The Little One disappeared.

She saw it all. What was that kid doing out there? If she goes out to investigate she will be discovered.

*I don't want any harm to come to him so I'll just watch.*

And watch she did—all night long. She awoke from a brief slumber to discover that he was gone.

*There are more people here than anyone knows about. I'll bet I haven't even seen them all.*

## CHAPTER 20

The Directors of the Tibetan Buddhist Learning Center in New Jersey, the state next to the monastery's home state of Pennsylvania, had given Brother Francis a commission.

“Would you stop by and see our Master when you are in Dharmasala?” they both asked. “He took over after our original Master left his body. He lives on the top floor of a place called the ‘Green Hotel.’ The building is located along Boxer Road, within walking distance from where you mention that you will be rooming.”

Andre and Brother Francis set out for a long walk. They wanted to see the sights and also to find the Master of their friends from New Jersey. Brother Francis also wanted to find an Ayurvedic doctor and experience a wellness treatment from him or her.

They walked along Boxer Road and there on the right was the Green Hotel. Here they were on the other side of the world, with vague directions, and they actually found what they were looking for. Francis sometimes had trouble doing that in his own neighborhood!

Andre offered a back-handed compliment: “That’s pretty good, Bro. You have difficulty finding your way around your own home town and often joke about how your sense of direction is not the best. Here in India you simply follow some inner muse and, wham, you get results!”

“Thanks my friend. Luck had more to do with this find than anything else.”

They entered the hotel and found themselves in a large dining room. When they asked for the Master they were told that he and a few other monks occupied the top floor of the building.

“Just walk up about four flights and you will be on the roof. Several rooms are built upon the top of the building and the monks are there.”

The travelers trudged up the outdoor concrete stairs. When they got to the top there was a large roof-top patio, complete with a variety of colorful flowerboxes. A tall monk in his late sixties came out from behind a screen door and greeted them.

Brother Francis explained that he was sent by the Directors of the Tibetan Buddhist Learning Center in New Jersey and wanted to say hello to the Master if possible.

He was told that the Master was giving a private teaching to another monk but that he would see what could be done. Within a few minutes Andre and Brother Francis were escorted into a large room where an older monk was seated on a raised platform and a younger monk was seated on a cushion on the floor. Both smiled warmly at the two Westerners.

Brother Francis explained his mission. The “hello” took only a few minutes. Although the Master was not a great Master of the English language, it was clear that he understood what was being said.

He gestured with his hand to a large yellow glass bowl full of hard candy. Brother Francis and Andre each took a few pieces and got the message that the audience was over. They bowed deeply to the Master and waved good bye to the younger monk who was still quietly sitting on his cushion on the floor.

“We are meeting lots of wonderful people, don’t you think, Andre?”

“Agreed, my brother. What a glorious trip! Let’s walk on a little farther and see what else is happening along Boxer Road.”

They took their time, stopping in a shop or two here or there as they felt led, then Brother Francis saw it—an Ayurvedic doctor’s office. He and Andre went in and unintentionally broke up some sort of a card game. Everyone left but the doctor.

“How can I help you, friends?”

“I’m a Catholic Christian monk and naturopathic doctor from the States. I specialize in Asian medicine and enjoy good health. Would you have a wellness treatment to offer me?”

“Certainly, for your friend also?” He looked at Andre.

“Andre has some classes he is planning on attending so is not as free with his time right now as I am.”

“Very well. Please come back tomorrow morning at ten and we will spend several hours keeping you well.”

The next morning Brother Francis took a brief cab ride back to the Ayurvedic doctor’s roadside office. He was greeted warmly and then the doctor began to walk out the front door.

“Where are you going, Doctor?” asked the monk.

“Why, to the treatment center. This is just the office.”

They walked across the road and down a grassy slope. After about five minutes they came to a large flagstone patio, complete with a small shrine to Lord Shiva, and a row of about eight treatment rooms. Two little children and a young woman were out enjoying the beautiful day at the far end of the patio. These people, presumably, comprised the family of the doctor.

Brother Francis sat on a stone bench near the shrine while the doctor prepared the treatment room. The sound of running water came from the concrete room, along with some metallic clanging.

*What is he planning on doing to me?*

After about ten minutes of preparation, Brother Francis was called in. The room was bare with the exception of a treatment table, a pressure cooker on a Bunsen burner, and a bowl of warm oil simmering on a low flame. A narrow rubber hose was attached to the lid of the pressure cooker.

In the West when someone goes for bodywork of any sort, standard procedure is to fill out a medical history form and sign a paper stating that nothing inappropriate will occur during the session. Then he or she is left alone to disrobe to the client’s degree of comfort, and drape oneself in a towel.

Francis looked around and asked what to do.

“Hang your clothing on that nail.”

*So much for formality.*

He disrobed and laid face down on the dark green vinyl-covered metal treatment table “clothed with the sky” as they say when speaking of a naked Indian saddhu or wandering beggar smeared with ashes.

The table was not nearly as uncomfortable as it appeared to be. The warm oil penetrated deeply into the traveler’s sore muscles spreading warmth and comfort into his very soul. Heating oil was such a simple thing yet made such a big difference.

The session felt safe and comfortable and lasted about an hour and one-half. Thinking that they were through, Brother Francis began to get up but the doctor simply pushed him back down.

The Indian medicine man picked up the faded red hose from the pressure cooker and slowly and carefully began to spray the mind-altered monk inch by inch. The unusual sensation was profoundly relaxing to psyche as well as body—except for the rare

occasion when a sputter of scalding water would emerge from the hose along with the steam and land on the patient's tender and exfoliated skin.

The doctor concluded the treatment and left the treatment room about two hours after they began. Brother Francis slid off the table and helped himself to a fluffy green towel.

He walked back to the rooming house peaceful and grateful. Following Christ had led him to many wonderful lands and cultures. Each experience taught him more about himself, others, and Christ.

## CHAPTER 21

Brother Francis wandered back toward the rooming house where he and his friend were staying. It's afternoon tea time. What a wonderful custom here in North India. *I need to remember that I'm not really in Tibet, but India.*

He entered a small tea shop on the main road. From his seat in the back of the little room he could look toward the front of the shop and see the majestic mountains through the large windows and open door.

Each table held four to five people comfortably—more if people squeezed in. A short stout man with curly silver hair entered the shop and looked around for a seat. Francis motioned for him to share the table that he was using. The man smiled, walked over, and sat down.

The two men stared at one another for a moment, and then said together: "Don't I know you?" After a little mental gymnastics on both of their parts, they remembered that they had met a day earlier at the audience with the Dalai Lama. Brother Francis was sharing tea time with one of the many media people who were surrounding his holiness when he was outside of the temple proper greeting Tibetan refugees.

"What a beautiful lilt in your voice," observed the monk. "Might you be from Ireland?"

"Right you are Brother. You have a good ear. I thought I lost most of my brogue."

"Half my genes are from Ireland and the other half are from Hungary," mentioned the monk to the media producer. "In reality, I claim only to be a part of the Kingdom of God. Less fighting that way!"

"What a beautiful philosophy. I think it's grand to be proud of one's heritage, but it is not necessary to be competitive about it. It makes for wars, you know."

"That I do, Kevin," replied Brother Francis. "I know a PBS producer. Perhaps he can be of help to you in promoting your documentary about the Dalai Lama. I'll write his name down for you."

Kevin graciously accepted a crumpled paper with the scribbled name on it. "It's fascinating to me that we can be from two different countries, meet spontaneously in yet a third and very different country, and have so much in common."

"That's the Kingdom of God for you, Kevin!"

"So it is, Brother, so it is."

The two new friends sipped their tea and felt a wave of relaxation wash over them in the midst of their respite from traveling.

All at once a man started yelling. He stood in the front door jamb dressed in orange robes and rattled on and on at the top of his voice in a mixture of Tibetan and English. No one knew quite what to do so the patrons of the tea shop tried to ignore him. A young girl from behind the counter stopped filling a glass pot with water, looked up, and gently spoke to the man, asking him to calm down and move on. He did.

The girl announced to the people in the shop that the man was not really a Hindu swami, Tibetan monk, or anything of the sort. He was “a little sick” she stated, and usually calmed down if you spoke to him gently.

“What a fine example of good Christian psychology,” observed Brother Francis. “One of my hats is in clinical psychology but that young woman just showed us the best of applied psychology.”

“It confirms what we were just sharing about my brother. War begets war, possessiveness begets possessiveness, and yelling begets yelling. How easily we can forget that.”

“As you know, Kevin, the sacredness of the present moment, the now, is central to Buddhist philosophy. It’s a foundational tenet of Salesian spirituality also. Salesian spirituality is the charism of my spiritual family. It’s the philosophy and theology by which we try to live. I’ve been at it for over forty years now and I’m still a work in progress.”

“Speaking of our struggles to be good people, Brother, how do you feel about the recent stories in the media about the clergy abusing young people?”

“They are painful situations which need healing and accountability. Both the victims and the perpetrators need help. Covering up the situations only makes matters worse. Some people think that clergy abuse is the result of the practice of celibacy by diocesan priests. I think it has more to do with their seminary training.

Before Vatican Council II, seminarians were treated very much like children. Grown men were given little to no responsibility during their student and graduate school years and then they were cast out, as it were, into a parish and told to help others deal with all sorts of life and death problems. Though well intentioned, the newly ordained were not very mature themselves. Sexual abuse is an abuse of power primarily and it is expressed in a genital way.”

“Wow, someone ought to make a documentary about that! You mentioned *diocesan* clergy when you spoke of celibacy. Is there another type of clergy?”

“Yes, Kevin, those members of religious orders who are also priests. You probably had Jesuits, Franciscans, Dominicans, and the like in Ireland, didn’t you?”

Yes, and those folks have vows of poverty, chastity, Eureka, I got it, and obedience, correct?”

“Correct. Clergy who are under a local bishop and belong to a diocese are required to make a *promise* of celibacy to the Bishop. They do not have a vow, which is always to *God*, of chastity like a monk or nun, or religious order priest. While there is a strong tradition of clerical celibacy, there is no scriptural requirement for the promise of celibacy for diocesan priests. Scripture and tradition, however, clearly call monastics to chastity and celibacy, whether they are Hindu, Buddhist, or Christian. The vows are supposed to be a way of loving and a path to inner freedom but, sadly, many view them as a deprivation.

“While I’m on my soapbox, Kevin, Christian monks and nuns actually have a slightly different focus to their vows as distinct from the vows of Religious Sisters and Brothers in other Orders. We vow Conversion of Life, Stability, and Obedience. Conversion implies an ongoing search for God by growing in simplicity and purity of heart, and that vow includes poverty and chastity. Stability means that we ordinarily are not transferred to other monasteries but live our entire monastic life in one community. On a much *deeper* level, stability means perseverance unto death. Obedience is the same for all Religious—a life of listening for the will of God and trying to respond to what we discern as God’s will for us.

“I’m a purist in almost everything I do. Vocational concepts have gotten far too muddied up, so to speak. That could lead us into a discussion about the need to be more supportive of the vocation to the single life or widowhood, but that’s another soapbox.”

“That is so interesting, Brother Francis. So, are you suggesting that if seminary students were clearer on what their vocation really is and are treated in a more mature manner, that they would grow up and grow into their vocations in a healthier way?”

“Yes Kevin, that is what I am suggesting. We do need to remember that every profession has its problems, not just the clergy, while not excusing the abuse in any way. I held these views long before the clergy scandals hit the press and even tried to share my ideas with some bishops. I got mixed reviews, so to speak.”

“I sense a little pain there. At least you did what you thought best, even if it did not go over very well.”

“Yes, and I have ministered to people on both sides of the abuse situation and am honored to do so. Jesus and the Buddha teach us to be compassionate. I try to be that, building on justice.”

“Just yesterday the Dalai Lama said that when we exercise compassion we need to include *ourselves* in the mix. I believe he called it *maitri*.”

“Yes, Kevin, we are often trained to be compassionate toward others but forget to exercise it toward ourselves. If we exercise true *maitri*, and include ourselves, I think we wind up back at the Kingdom of God, a place where peace and justice can truly reign. This side of eternity, we are still working on it, however.”

The waitress came over, said that she overheard their conversation, knew who they both were, and would like their tea to be “on the roof.”

Kevin and Brother Francis looked at one another quizzically, then both laughed and said together” “I think she means ‘on the house.’”

“That’s it! We’re on the house in the Kingdom of Tibet, which is in the Kingdom of God. Thanks gentlemen.”

## CHAPTER 22

Meanwhile, in the Kingdom of Brodheadsville things were becoming more and more unsettled. Nothing overt was really happening but the little monastic community was restless. Everyone seemed preoccupied.

“We are probably not giving our Observer a very good impression of monastic life,” mentioned Sister Jane de Chantal to Sister Scholastica one day on a walk through the fall foliage.

“Perhaps so, Sister, but Anthony strikes me as a person who has been through a lot in life already. I think he probably has a pretty realistic view of life and human beings. Sometimes he seems so mature, realistic, and open to life. Other times, however, I’m not so sure.” The nun lapsed into a silent reverie.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, it’s hard to put your finger on it, you know? Anthony is fun to talk with and has many interesting stories and adventures to share but sometimes what he talks about is not *quite* believable. Individual stories are okay, but when you add them all up, they just don’t ring true. Yet, he is a likeable person.”

Scholastica continued: “Just last week he was asking about Brother Francis and his present trip to India. Anthony said that he was in India once. Given all his other stories, I find it hard to believe. One person just can’t do all that he has done or be related to the people he says that he is related to.”

“I didn’t want to say anything, Sister Scholastica, lest I color other people’s perceptions of Anthony, but I must admit to some misgivings about our Observer myself. Like you, I just can’t pin it down.”

A small red car zoomed by, swirling a rainbow of leaves in its wake. The car stopped, backup lights glowed, and the driver backed up.

“Hello Sisters, can I give you a lift?”

The nuns both smiled broadly, the first real smile in many days. “Doctor Fleur, it is so wonderful to see you,” said Sister Scholastica.

“Yes it is,” added Sister Jane de Chantal. “We are both named after the same saint and need to see more of one another.”

“Please girls, call me Chantal. I’ve asked you to do that before but then your customs might dictate otherwise.”

“Names are so secondary. It’s the heart that matters,” responded Sister Scholastica with a smile.

“I’m on my way to the monastery. Just wanted to say hello.”

“We’ll hop in the car before we get hit by one and make some green tea, how’s that?” offered Sister Jane de Chantal.

“Deal.”

The card briefly zigzagged along two country roads. They drove up the driveway to the monastery. The asphalt was covered with damp multi-colored leaves.

Chantal, in this monastic atmosphere, thought of the biblical story of the coat of many colors that Joseph of the Bible was given. His brothers became so jealous of that beautiful coat and what they thought it symbolized that it nearly cost Joseph his life. *What richness our emotions can add to our lives when dealt with properly. What pain they produce when they go awry.*

The three women exited the car after it came to a lurching stop. Chantal was nearly as quick behind the wheel as she was of mind.

“Anthony made some blueberry scones yesterday,” Sister Scholastica chattered excitedly. “Shall we have them as part of our collation?”

“I love it!” responded Chantal. You folks have a special name for just about everything in life. By “collation” I suppose you mean a snack.”

“Right you are Doctor F.”

The mood of the two nuns was lifting rapidly. It was nice to be with an old friend of the community and distracted from recent and vague uneasy feelings.

“Who is this Anthony of the scones, may I ask?” questioned Chantal. “Sounds like there may be a new member of the community among you. Then again, he could be here on retreat for a while.”

“He’s not *officially* a member of the community. Anthony is here for his one month Observership. Abbot Francis is still in India, as you know. So we are left to observe one another, as it were.”

“What’s the next step?”

“If his Observership goes well, the community may invite him to return at a later date as a Postulant, or one formally seeking entrance into the monastery to eventually become a monk, in this case.”

The Mister Coffee machine gurgled the last of its water through the green tea leaves. Chantal, comfortable in this setting, filled three battered mugs with steaming emerald green tea and placed them on the wooden refectory table nearby. The Sisters materialized a large basket full of inviting blueberry scones which were wrapped in a yellow napkin. Several types of jelly, made by the Carmelite nuns, also appeared.

“Brother Francis usually uses almond butter. May we get you some Doctor Fleur?” asked Sister Jane de Chantal.

“No thank you, I...” Her voice trailed off and she held a scone in mid-air near her mouth.

“What is it Chantal?” asked a worried Sister Scholastica. Chantal was staring at something so the two nuns turned in the direction of her gaze.

“Hello Anthony. We were just enjoying some of your wonderful scones,” said Sister Jane de Chantal, trying to sound natural and make sense out of Chantal’s odd reaction to Anthony’s entrance into the room.

“Don’t let me interrupt you. I was just on my way out for a walk.” Anthony hurried through the room and out the front door without even allowing time for the Sisters to introduce him to their visitor.

“Is everything alright dear?” questioned Sister Jane de Chantal.

“Oh yes, yes. I suppose I’m just missing my old grad school friend and fellow sleuth, Brother Francis.”

“We all are. He will be back in a few days. We have some community decisions to make. One has to do with Anthony,” said the Prioress Sister Jane de Chantal.

Chantal remained preoccupied throughout the rest of the visit. It had started off so light-heartedly and now the forensic psychologist suddenly seemed to catch the same emotional virus the community had been dealing with recently.

All three women tried, but the earlier freedom of their little gathering could not be re-captured. Eventually Chantal thanked the nuns for their hospitality and promised them that she would be in touch. She mentioned something about having to sort out a few things.

The three parted in friendship but uneasily and disappointed.

## CHAPTER 23

Every train ride that the two travelers to India had scheduled was in reality about twice as long as anticipated. An overnight journey on the rails was really two. Twenty hours became forty. India was crisscrossed with trains which moved millions of people daily across the huge country.

Andre said that forty days is the normal mourning period in the Orthodox Church. Since he had put in forty hours on a train he had done enough mourning and wanted to fly whenever possible during the next legs of the journey.

The travelers got off the train from Dharmasala, north India, in Delhi. The crowded conditions were overwhelming. People seemed to fill every nook and cranny. It was a low-point for the two friends.

“What are we doing here anyway, Bro? Let’s get on the next plane back home. What do you say?”

Andre was clearly uncomfortable. Francis felt the same way but did not want to make any snap decisions. He found himself thinking about his monastery in Pennsylvania. He could be home enjoying peace and quiet right now rather than being on the other side of the world.

*Hmmm, I wonder how the community is making out with that new Observer. What was his name? Oh yes, Anthony.*

Francis tried to be logical. *Both of us are seasoned travelers so there must be some validity to our experience of wanting to flee.*

“I can understand your impulse to get out of here. Can you hang on for a day or so? Perhaps we will adjust to the crowded conditions.”

Andre reluctantly agreed.

They hired a pedal-cart, complete with driver, who ferried them from hotel to hotel until they found one that they both felt relatively comfortable with. Showers and rest were a very important part of long-distance travel and the two friends found the medicine of water and sleep deeply healing.

The next morning Andre and Francis agreed to take the flight and then the six hour daylight train ride to Tamil Nadu, South India, the land of Shanthivanam—the Christian Ashram, or spiritual community, of the late Catholic monk Bede Griffiths.

“Not having to sleep in these rolling metal cages make them easier to take,” commented Andre as they clicked along the metal rails watching rice patties go by.

“Yes, Andre, and flying during the longer transitions in place of the trains helps also.”

Both men were committed to helping the poor, especially in the area of health care and spirituality. They found themselves wondering what the limits of their commitments were—perhaps they had reached them.

Getting off the train was easier this time. There were the usual crowds and beggars but not in the same numbers as in Delhi. The travelers started to relax and get excited about Shanthivanam.

“Why did Bede Griffiths go to India in the first place?” questioned Andre.

“He was a Benedictine monk from England, Andre, but developed a longing to help Eastern and Western people learn to respect and relate to one another in the area of spirituality. He stayed committed to his Christian monastic life but delved deeply into the Hindu tradition. Bede’s mission was not about conversion but communication. In

relating and understanding the East, he and his followers grew more deeply committed to Christ and saw Christ in their Hindu sisters and brothers also.”

“Did it work the other way around also, Brother?”

“Yes it did my friend. The Hindus eventually venerated Bede as a great Swami. In fact, a Hindu Swami is the equivalent of a Christian monk.”

The cab driver who was racing through the crowds toward the Christian ashram of Shanthivanam looked angry and a bit sinister. As long as he gets us there in one piece, thought Francis, I don’t care what he looks like.

“So, Brother Francis, an ashram is a Hindu concept, but Father Bede created the first Christian version of one, correct?”

“That’s right Andre.”

“Why do they call him ‘Father’ if he is a monk? I thought monks were called ‘Brother’ in accord with the custom of the early Christians who called one another ‘Brother’ or ‘Sister.’”

“A monk has a whole and complete vocation, distinct from the priesthood.”

There were no priests in monasteries in the early centuries. In fact, many of the priests were married in those days. Eventually a few monks were ordained for sacramental ministry in the monastery. Then this became the custom and canon law eventually even forced it by only allowing those preparing for priesthood to become solemnly professed monks. But the primitive observance of monastic life sees the vocation of a monk as totally focusing on the search for God and the sacred, on monastic profession of vows, silence, meditation, celebrating the Liturgy of the Hours, solitude, and flowing out of that perhaps service to others.”

Saint Benedict himself was certainly a monk and abbot, but not a priest. Saint Francis of Assisi was a friar, a wandering mendicant, but not a priest. Both of these saints were the inspiration for two of the largest religious orders in the world. In the minds of many Catholics, however, they are lumped together with priests. Not a bad thing, but not an accurate thing either.

“I understand that since Vatican Council II there is a movement back to the primitive observance of monastic life—simple and smaller communities. So Father Bede was a monk who was also a priest, thus he was called ‘Father.’”

“That’s about right, but let’s complicate it a bit more, shall we?”

“Why didn’t I see this one coming?” Andre said as he laughed.

“In early monasticism, *sans* priests, all were Brother or Sister but the monks in leadership were Father. So, the Abbot and perhaps the Prior, second in charge, were often called Father.”

“I’ll just call all these folks Brother, how’s that?”

“Perfect Andre. Father Bede would love it since he was a prime mover in going back to a simple, primitive, and more egalitarian monastic life.”

They arrived at Shanthivanam in the dark while the community was sitting quietly on the floor in the open-air refectory eating dinner with their hands. Brother Paschal left the meal and welcomed them warmly. They slipped into the moon-lit room and sat down on the floor to munch rice and curried vegetables from a banana leaf plate.

When everyone was finished, one of the monks began a Sanskrit chant as a grace after meals prayer. The fifteen or so men and women chanted together softly, and then quietly left the room to go outside and wash their cups and place them on a rack to dry.

Brother Paschal showed the tired pilgrims around the ashram and then to their hut. They were put in a cinderblock room which even had a shower room in it. The beds were made of sheet metal with a *very* thin cotton pad on top of the metal. Four poles on the corners of each bed held patched mosquito netting up and around the occupant.

Sleep was a welcome gift.

## CHAPTER 24

“Was it me, Sister Scholastica, or did Doctor Fleur seem to change moods right before our very eyes?”

“If it was you, then it was me also, Sister Jane. She did react to something. I think it might have had to do with Anthony. When he entered the room she appeared to lose it—and that’s not easy for a woman as accomplished as our Chantal. Anthony disappeared quickly also. He usually has better manners than that. I thought that we would at least be able to introduce them to one another.”

They washed up the tea things in silence and went to their rooms to think things through. About an hour later the phone rang.

“Salesian Monastery, this is Brother Matthew speaking,” answered the young monk. Matthew had made great strides since some earlier traumatic experiences in life and since his monastic profession.

“This is Trooper Jonas of the State Police. Is Abbot Francis available?”  
Matthew’s mind started to swirl.

“No he isn’t Trooper Jonas. Would you like to speak with our Prioress, Sister Jane de Chantal?”

“That will be fine Brother.”

Grim-faced, Brother Matthew went to fetch Sister Jane. He remembered too well that the community had dealt with Trooper Jonas in the past. The man was very nice but Matthew smelled trouble again.

“Brother Francis is out of the country Trooper Jonas. Is there anything that I can do for you?”

“We have a man here at the barracks who says that he lives at the Salesian Monastery. He was picked up for shop lifting.”

“I can’t imagine who that might be Trooper. Did he give you a name?”

“He calls himself ‘Dymphna.’ That sound’s like a woman’s name to me and, while he looks pretty macho, there is something feminine about him.”

“Dymphna is the patron saint of the mentally ill, Trooper Jonas. The story goes that she had some sort of emotional problem and was on a journey one time and spent the night in the woods somewhere. When she woke her mental affliction was gone. The story spread and the rest is Church history!”

As she was speaking, Sister Jane de Chantal had an insight which hit her like a bolt of lightning wrapped in a clap of thunder.

“Brother Matthew and I will drive right over if that is acceptable.”

“Perfect, Sister. See you soon.”

Sister Jane pulled out of the monastery driveway with Brother Matthew in the passenger seat. As they made their way to Route 209 South, Brother Matthew produced a dusty old book.

“This is a book on the lives of the saints that I pulled off a library shelf after overhearing you talk with Trooper Jonas. I marked the page about Saint Dymphna. Perhaps knowing more about her will help solve the mystery of our mysterious new community member. He read:

“Dymphna was fourteen when her mother died. Her father, Damon, is said to have been afflicted with a mental illness brought on by his grief. He sent messengers throughout his town and other lands to find some woman of noble birth, resembling his wife, who would be willing to marry him. When none could be found, his evil advisers told him to marry his own daughter. Dymphna fled from her castle together with St. Gerebran, who was her confessor, and two other friends.

“Damon found them in Belgium. He gave orders that the priest's head be cut off. Then Damon tried to persuade his daughter to return to Ireland with him. When she refused, he drew his sword and struck off her head. She was then only fifteen years of age. Dymphna received the crown of martyrdom about the year 620. She is the patron of those suffering from nervous and mental afflictions. Many miracles have taken place at her shrine, built on the spot where she was buried in Gheel, Belgium.”

“So her *father* was the one with the emotional problems. Wow, talk about a traumatic youth!” the young monk exclaimed. “It all happened so long ago and far away that we don’t know the exact details but if even half of what poor Saint Dymphna is reputed to have experienced truly happened, it’s a wonder she didn’t split into multiple personalities.”

“What do you mean, Brother?”

“Brother Francis would know lots more about this topic than I do, but I had a few psych courses in college and I remember that many people who experience multiple personality disorder, often called ‘schizophrenia’ but it really isn’t that, have had a very traumatic youth. There was so much trauma that the host personality, the real person so to speak, blacks out and a sliver of the host personality emerges as a new entity. The process goes on and on as a way of coping. Often the number of personalities is in the teens.”

“I don’t like what I am hearing, Brother Matthew.”

“And I don’t like what I think you might be thinking, Sister.”

## CHAPTER 25

“I feel like I’m a hundred,” groaned Andre as he stretched his tan arms and legs on his metal bed under the mosquito netting.

Francis laughed loudly. “I don’t have one ounce of compassion for you Andre. You are half my age and I managed.”

“Yes, but you do yoga, qigong, run, power walk, take only God knows how many nutraceuticals and herbs!”

“Try it my friend. You will love it! Now pull that mop of black hair back and get your pony tail in gear! Brother Prasad, the Abbot, is giving class shortly. I understand that he is an expert on world religions and has a gift for communicating the heart of the various belief systems he teaches about in a very clear fashion.”

“Let me get a quick shower first. Did any living creatures manage to crawl into our shower during the night, Bro?”

“No, I was just in the bathroom and its all clear.”

Andre wobbled toward the shower, entered, turned on the water, and began to yell. The water was cold so he yelled during the entire course of every shower.

Francis spied a little cardboard box, about two inches high and one inch square. It had contained a bottle of Yunnan Bai Yao powder, a Chinese medicinal powder for soft tissue damage. Both had taken some mixed with water the night before to help ease their traveler’s aches.

The monk impishly threw the little box into the shower through the partially opened metal door. Andre stopped his yelling just long enough to scream.

“I’m sorry my Canadian friend. The devil made me do it!”

“Well, I’m wide awake now,” is all Andre said over the sound of rushing water.

Soon they were seated on the floor of an octagonal cinder block building with about twenty other men and women from all over the world. Many of these visitors were writing master’s theses and doctoral dissertations on Shanthivanam and / or the late Bede Griffiths, OSB Cam., Benedictine monk of the Camaldolese or hermit branch of the Benedictine order.

Brother Prasad was dressed in orange and spoke softly. He was lecturing on the human search for God—transitioning from nature worship all the way to Jesus.

“You see, the Pharisees had bound up Judaism with so many laws and interpretations thereof that some Jews felt like their spiritual nest had been turned into a cage. Jesus came along to invite us to the nest of inner freedom. Eventually some Christians felt like birds caught in a cage once again.

“And so the cycle goes. Religion, along with its applied experience called spirituality, is essentially an invitation to grow. We walk a fine line between true freedom and license—not caring what the rules say.”

After the monastic class many of the students shared their views on the deceptively simple monk who had them all re-thinking religion and their love or dislike of it. Many remarked that Jesus had probably taught in a similar fashion.

Brother Francis could eat just about anything, and was grateful for everything, but he couldn’t eat curry. The guests would wash and cut up vegetables after breakfast for the main meal at noon and by the time the vegetables got to the guests they were covered with curry in one form or another. One day one of the guests slipped Francis an apple on the way out of the refectory. The gift in all of this for him is that the monk completely lost his appetite and was in no way sick or ill at ease over the situation. He simply did not want the monks to discover his plight and be uncomfortable. Fortunately that did not happen.

The chapel was captivating. Like the other common buildings, it was made up of a wall about three feet high on top of which were wooden posts about ten feet high which held up a thatched roof. The front of the chapel contained a large concrete room which

opened into the chapel proper. Within that room was a tabernacle, a sacred box about two feet square, which contained the Blessed Sacrament—the body and blood of Christ in the form of consecrated bread. An oil lamp warmly flickered in one corner of this sanctuary.

Any Hindu who entered such a chapel would immediately understand that God was present in that place. Such a “holy of holies” was present in every Hindu temple and customarily contained a statue of a Hindu deity in some form of manifestation.

Evening meditation in the chapel was a bit of a challenge. Mosquitoes liked to meditate also it appeared. Those who chose to use the chapel for evening meditation often lit incense sticks nearby in order to keep the insects away. Morning Prayer and Eucharist were easier. Mosquitoes liked to sleep in.

One evening the community was treated to a video, the story of the first few people who journeyed to South India. Their efforts eventually turned into the Christian ashram known throughout the world as Shanthivanam, and which spawned other smaller ashrams with a similar philosophy. Some Christian hermits populated the area also.

These early pioneers really went into a kind of twilight zone. Church law and civil law had no real place for them. Many were already monks, nuns, or clergy. Some were able to stay affiliated with their monasteries or dioceses; others were eventually released from their religious orders or dioceses. Today, fortunately, since Canon 603 has resurrected the vocation of hermits, individuals can live a monastic life alone rather than in community. If a community forms around such a person so be it, but it is not essential.

The Bishops of South India want their seminarians to visit Shanthivanam in order to be exposed to deep meditation and interreligious dialogue. They are well aware that clergy need to be formed in ways that go beyond the classroom setting.

After the seminarians, and other visitors, found out that Brother Francis was a naturopathic doctor, a small line would form each morning after veggie prep outside the cinder block hut he shared with Andre. He did what he could with the limited supplies he had with him to treat them. All left the hut grateful for his care.

One seminarian asked if Francis would be his uncle. The Indian custom is to adopt such aunts and uncles as the Spirit leads. A monk who wants to be a brother to all is now also an uncle to someone in India. God is truly the God of surprises.

## CHAPTER 26

The two monastics were a little embarrassed as they walked into the State Police barracks. Just about everyone in town knew of them anyway, but their gray and blue habits certainly attracted lots of attention as they walked into the modern one story building.

Trooper Jonas met with them in a little room near the front desk. “This Dymphna was caught shop lifting at Dollar General. He stole a magnifying glass with a little battery operated light in it and some pens, rubber bands, and a few other trinkets. Even though Dollar General carries items that may cost more than a dollar, everything is very inexpensive so he didn’t rack up much of a bill, so to speak. He was driving erratically when he left the store and a police officer pulled him over and took him back to Dollar

General since he had items from them and no bag or sales slip. Let's go next door and see if we can clarify things."

The three confused people got up and went into the next room, which was just as small, containing only a few folding chairs and a table with a goose neck lamp on it. The worst fears of the two monastics were confirmed.

"Dear Lord, he *does* live with us, Trooper Jonas. He's been with us almost a month now doing an Observership. He's not *officially* a part of the community but we are all discerning the possibility of his vocation to monastic life."

"Hello Anthony," said Sister Jane simply and warmly. "How can we be of help?"

"Anthony is the one who needs help. I'm Dymphna. The only reason I got caught is because I can't drive."

"But you showed us your license when you came to the monastery," Brother Matthew stated. "Remember? We needed to know if you could drive so we could send you out to do community shopping once in a while."

"You have the wrong person Brother. Maybe your eyes are not so good. Mine are not; that's why I needed the magnifying glass—to help me continue my investigation. Is the Little One safe? I'm very concerned about him."

"What little one dear?" asked Sister Jane.

"You know, the little guy who prowls around the monastery at night."

Matthew and Jane looked at one another dumbfounded.

"And the others, how are they?" the shoplifter queried.

"What others dear?"

"The other people who live at the monastery of course."

"Oh you mean people like Abbot Francis and Sister Scholastica," Matthew said, trying to sound relaxed but not succeeding very well.

"No, not them. The ones who prowl around when you folks are not looking—like me. There must be about fifteen of us by now."

Trooper Jonas and the monk and nun he called in to help clarify things were more confused than ever. There was a pregnant pause. One or the other of the three "investigators" began to say something, then they let the thoughts and words die before their birth.

Finally, Sister Jane de Chantal, like her patron saint might do, took matters in hand. "Trooper, might we have a word with you in private?"

"Sure, why not? Nothing else seems to be working."

Three of the four people returned to their earlier meeting room.

"Obviously Anthony is having some sort of break down. I know that is an imprecise and catch all sort of term but I can think of none other at the moment. Might we call in Detective David Gold, a friend of the community, to meet with you and try to sort out the legal end of things? Might we also take Anthony back to the monastery and have Detective Gold's wife, Doctor Chantal Fleur, meet with Anthony?"

"At least that's a plan, Sister. I'm sure we can release this gentleman into your care. As you know, we've all worked on other cases together and helped to solve them. I have faith that this one will also be solved."

The state trooper smiled a devilish smile. "If we can resolve this case without the help of Brother Francis I think it will be a feather in all our caps—and we will have official proof that he was out of the country through his passport!"

“A sense of humor always helps,” Brother Matthew added.

Sister Jane made a few phone calls and she, Anthony / Dymphna, and Brother Matthew drove back to the monastery in near silence.

When they got out of the car, Doctor Chantal Fleur was waiting for them on the porch. The look on her face was hard to decipher. She was certainly in her forensic psychologist mode.

## CHAPTER 27

“You are a *real* monk,” said Brother Paul to Brother Francis. Paul lived at Shanthivanam but the two monks had not had the opportunity to speak until now.

“Why do you say that?” Francis asked in response.

“Because of the way you live your vocation. Monastic life is your entire call, like in the early Church and in the primitive monastic practice. Not like me,” he laughed, “who is also a priest.”

“That’s a wonderful vocation also,” the Salesian monk added, it’s just that too many were sort of forced into a “buy one get one free” vocation that in some cases distorted both vocations. Obviously it has not done that to yours.

“You are very kind Brother Francis.”

Brother Francis spent much of that day praying in the hut of the late founder, Bede Griffiths. His hut had been set aside as a sort of shrine or prayer room since the founder’s death in the 1980s.

*Look at this book case. I have some of these very books at home. Here is one about Mount Saviour Monastery near Elmira, New York. I go there from time to time. Same spirit as here—simple monastic life—just not so much of the East-West dialogue going on there.*

One monk praying in the cell of another monk. One still on earth, the other released totally into the world of the Spirit. Francis’ meditation was timeless and without geography. The scientists might call it a “non-local” experience. Hours passed and soon it would be dawn and time to leave Shanthivanam.

Francis tiptoed into the hut he shared with Andre. This time Andre woke him instead of the other way around. “Get a move on my brother. We have a car ride, a train ride, and a flight to Hyderabad to visit the clinics you have us lined up to see. I’m psyched!”

Andre took his shower and yelled the entire time that the cold water washed over him. Pony tail in place, he was ready to go.

A taxi driver took the travelers to the train station. He careened through the streets and once, on passing a roadside Hindu shrine, took his hands completely off the wheel and joined them palm to palm above his head in an act of reverence.

“That act of devotion was close to what we used to call ‘Last Rites,’” whispered Andre to his monastic friend.

“I know. Now it’s called the ‘Sacrament of the Sick.’ Either way, I’m glad we made it through the traffic in one piece again.”

Once on the train, and again on the plane, the travelers slept.

The next few days were spent in the clinics of Ayurvedic, Chinese, and Western practitioners. The travelers observed or participated in various forms of healing: something resembling physical therapy, stimulation of acupuncture points by an electric device, hot oil treatments, herbal concoctions, meditation, prayer, and talk therapy. Some clinics catered to the very poor, some to the more affluent, but all were very caring and attracted patients and their families from miles around.

They flew out of Hyderabad, India, in the middle of the night. The airport was dominated by hundreds of burqa-clad women on their way East. The long black garments, covering everything but the eyes, gave way to flashes of color at the ankles where brightly colored pants could be seen peeking out.

It would take five airplanes to get home so the two friends who knew each other even better now, mentally and physically, settled in for another day of travel.

## CHAPTER 28

As Chantal was closing the door to a small community room which held a donated VCR player and some chairs, and was filled with lots of wonderful sunlight, Jane and Matthew overheard her say: “Well, it’s nice to see you once again Dymphna.”

Whatever that meant, the two monastics simply put their trust in God and in their community friend, and grad school colleague and friend of their abbot, Brother Francis.

It was a Sunday so community members were off in all directions recreating and renewing themselves. Some hiked, some read, and some baked. Sunday was a day to be flexible.

Over an hour later Chantal emerged from the community room looking a little bit worn. The sun was fading into pastels now. She held a small tape recorder in her hand.

No one was in the kitchen, dining, or living areas, which all made up the great room. She swung the cord on the brass bell which ordinarily announced meals and other community gatherings.

Within minutes the entire community was present, all back from their adventures and preparing for Evening Prayer.

“May I address the community Sister Jane?” asked the forensic psychologist.

“By all means Doctor F.”

“When there is clear and present danger of harm to self or another, Pennsylvania law permits—sometimes *requires*—that a licensed psychologist divulge what is normally privileged and confidential material. If a doctor of psychology errs on *either* side of that fine line he or she can be in trouble. The clear and present danger, as I see it, is that Anthony’s driving was dangerous to himself and others so I will share with you what I think is appropriate and nothing beyond that.”

“How can his driving be dangerous? Anthony has been driving fine up to this point,” questioned Sister Scholastica.

“That’s just it, Sister. Anthony’s driving is fine—but *Dymphna’s* is not. In fact, she is not even a licensed driver.”

“Who’s Dymphna?” asked Brother Benedict with his usual direct approach.  
*Benedict doesn’t look so good. But that’s another story for another time.*

“Dymphna is one of the many personalities Benedict has developed. He has what used to be called ‘Multiple Personality Disorder.’ Now we refer to it as ‘Dissociative Identity Disorder’ or DID for short.”

“Brother and Sister filled us in a little bit, Doctor Fleur. So this Dymphna character is really Anthony in another form.

“Something like that Brother. People with DID have often had a very traumatic youth and the various personalities which emerge out of that chaos are parts of the person which are trying to cope with life. Unfortunately, the person has blocked out so much of life that each personality becomes an entity of its own. They have little knowledge of one another.”

“Hmmm,” Benedict continued. “Sometimes I feel either I can’t scrape one decent personality together or at other times I feel that I have a few of them.”

“The various moods or frames of mind we get into are simply that. Sometimes I need to be serious or have on my doctor hat. At other times my role can be different. In all cases, however, I *know* the other frames of mind, they share a common memory bank and personality.”

“Got it,” Benedict mumbled.

Brother Matthew spoke up. “But how could Anthony / Dymphna not know how to drive?”

“Easily Brother Matthew. Each personality is just that. They can be of different ages, sexes, abilities, etc. One might have allergies and another need glasses. Dymphna, for example, was not a licensed driver and had poor eyesight. That’s why she stole the lighted magnifying glass from the Dollar General Store.”

“What did she need to see?” asked Sister Jane.

“Dymphna is a little paranoid and was trying to find records the monastery might be keeping about Anthony. She wanted to make sure that ‘nice things’ were being written and said about him so that he would be accepted as a postulant to the monastery if that is what he decided he wanted to do. When you folks would go to bed, Dymphna would often prowl about looking for such records.”

Sister Scholastica asked: “But why steal? She / he had money.”

“It gets a bit more complicated now. Remember that each personality has its own personality and traits, so to speak. Dymphna is a kleptomaniac. Tension builds up in her until she indulges in her impulse to steal. Most of the time the items stolen are not even useful to the person, though some can be, as is the case with the magnifying glass. She took other items from Dollar General also—things easily available to her here.”

Sister Jane spoke—more to herself than to the group. “That would account for the items in the community which have been disappearing recently: my Office Book, Brother Matthew’s cap, incense sticks, and perhaps a few other things we thought too small to mention.”

“Very likely,” agreed Chantal.

Brother Matthew asked about Anthony’s references to the “Little One” and “The others.”

“Multiples, sorry, DID folks often have more than two or three personalities. Anthony probably has fifteen to twenty. I have not met them all. One of them is a little

boy of about eleven years of age. He wants to be a ‘good boy’ and has tried to do some little favors for the community such as...”

“...planting flowers and cleaning up.” Matthew finished the thought for her.

“Exactly,” Little One just told me that.

The entire community exclaimed: “What?”

Chantal sighed. “Anthony was in treatment with me for a few months prior to coming here. I knew him as ‘Vincent.’ I’m still not certain of his legal name. He said that he didn’t have medical insurance so I never had occasion to check out or question the name he gave me at intake. I gave him a break on the fee because he had no health insurance, which is what I normally do.

“Clinical hypnosis is the treatment of choice for DID, since the alters or sub-personalities are easily manifested and communicated with in trance. We were making good progress when he abruptly stopped therapy. The next time I saw him was several months later—last week when I visited here.

“At any rate, I just hypnotized Anthony and recorded our conversation. Several of the personalities emerged. One of them wants him to be here as you know. That one is Dymphna. Another does not want him to enter the monastery and he is fighting the process—won’t even tell me his name yet. I taped all of this because Anthony will have a hard time accepting that all of this is happening within him.

“When he was in treatment with me he revealed a traumatic event that took place on a train in India, for example. That even may have been real. We have to sort out reality from non-reality very slowly and get the personalities to communicate with one another.”

“What next?” asked Brother Benedict.

“David, my dear detective husband, through the magic of police computers, has found an aunt of Anthony’s in Philadelphia. I’m up to date on David’s progress through the magic of cell phones. With the cooperation of this monastery, David and I would like to take Anthony to Philadelphia and have him treated as an in-patient at Friends Hospital there.”

“That sounds like a fine idea and a compassionate next step,” agreed Sister Jane de Chantal. The other members nodded in assent.

“Now, shall we say hello to Anthony?”

The others nodded once again, but with some caution.

## CHAPTER 29

Chantal opened the community room door and asked Anthony to join them. He had obviously been crying and looked confused and upset.

“Anthony is his old self right now,” Chantal explained, “but one of his other personalities likes to lie. What he has to tell you could be therapeutic for him.”

Anthony sat down on one of the small refectory benches near the table around which the community was gathered.

“That’s right everyone. I learned that much when I was being treated by Doctor Fleur and I have a vague recollection of one of my alters telling you that I lived next door to Lucille Ball. Not true. I think my alter also mentioned that I was related to Charles

Worthington, after whom Worthington State Forest at the Delaware Water Gap is named. Also not true.

His voice wavered. "Please forgive me for any trouble I have caused you. I could certainly feel the tension mounting in the community and perhaps that is what triggered my shift to Dymphna and the eventual exposure of my difficulties to you."

The community assured Anthony that there was nothing to forgive and that the main thing at this point was for him to get better.

David Gold walked through the front door, confident and strong. "Hello everyone. Looks like the situation is well in hand."

"Yes Detective," Sister Jane said. We are grateful to you and to your lovely wife."

"I take it that you are Anthony Vincent," David said with a warm smile that also communicated being in charge.

"Yes sir I am. Thank you so much for all that you and Doctor Fleur have done. It is truly above and beyond the call of duty."

"Happy to do it. Your aunt is waiting with open arms to help also. She says you disappeared about a year ago and she has been worried sick since then. Calls you 'Vinnie' by the way."

"Yes, that's me. At least it's the person I want to get back to being. I suppose that my disappearance was around the time my alternate personalities really took over. I have so many unaccounted for gaps in my memory, but I do remember my dear Aunt Sarah and can't wait to see her again."

"Then the three of us are off to Philly."

After hugs all around, and with a blessing from the Prioress Sister Jane, David, Chantal, and Anthony drove away into the night. Red tail lights faded as the community watched the car drive away. A sense of relief quickly settled upon the small community and comforted each member.

Minutes later the door opened and Brother Francis walked in, looking a little frayed around the edges.

"Hello everyone. Anything exciting happen while I was gone?"

*Sat Chit Ananda*