

# **Vigils**

## **from the Office of the Dead**

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

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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 murder 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 Letitia Seif, my aunt and Godmother, and the first person to take me to church.*

## Chapter 1

LANTAU ISLAND, SOUTH CHINA SEA, ASIA, March, 1998. Did I *really* wake up hours ago to the thunder of drumbeats at 3:30 a.m. this morning? Our call to keep vigil through chant and meditation back in the States is done through a bell, which we consider to be the voice of God calling us to prayer. Drums or bell, the call has always been *loud and clear*.

Life's mysterious events, however, are not always so clear. Openness to letting life unfold and, in a sense, dancing with it, usually resolves most mysteries sooner or later. It is the "later" part that is often the real challenge in life.

Deafening silence now. The sea is just far enough away so that the waves can be heard only with the ear of the heart. Ahhhhh. I am peacefully alone at last. It is so profoundly wonderful to be quiet and to *just be*. My muscles seem to be melting like wax in the warmth of the sun. My ministry keeps me deeply involved with so many fine people and I consider it a great gift. Right now, however, *this* is a great gift!

The guestmaster told me that the entire community of *Chan* Buddhist monks and nuns, the Chinese equivalent of Japanese *Zen* monastics, would be at a community meeting all morning long and that I would be in complete solitude. He seemed to think that I might get lonely or become frightened, but I am far from either. Maybe the guestmaster's concern has something to do with the fact that I am halfway around the world from home. Anyway, we Christian monastics call our community meetings "Chapter." Many Christian monastics do not even know why such gatherings are given that name. My understanding is that it comes from the practice of reading a chapter of the Rule of the monastery at such a communal get together. I wonder what

the Chinese name for their monastic community meeting is. Who cares about that? The point is that I am completely in solitude on this remote Asian island, far away from stress and responsibility.

*Slow down mind.* It's not necessary to think about such little things now. Those *little* musings sometimes fill my entire meditation. When I look at other people who are meditating, they seem so tranquil. So many others have said the same thing about me and to me. At times it is tranquil, but for meditation to be truly *fruitful*, it needs to be turbulent at times also. Saint Francis de Sales encourages us not to base the "success" of our prayer on feelings. Likes and dislikes, in prayer or in anything else, we are encouraged to embrace them all—at least with the higher part of the soul. The lower part of the soul often rebels and that doesn't make us bad, just human.

Even these so called "holy" thoughts can be a distraction or a defense from letting go and letting God in to do whatever God wants to within me. I know that it is not necessary to think about such mundane, or even lofty, things most of the time, especially during meditation. Conserve energy and effort for bigger and more important issues. Sounds like a good resolution to make. May the intense stillness here deepen the imprint of that resolution on my soul so that I can remember it when I return to the States. The barely perceptible breeze kissing my face is beginning to help me slow down within. Wonder what they are talking about at their meeting up there in the monastery common room. *I'm doing it again!* Let the distracting thoughts just drift in and out of your mind like autumn leaves. How many times I've given others that advice.

The early morning orange glow reflecting off the ocean fills the treetops with an iridescent shimmer. The heat is not really oppressive but adds to the wave-like quality of the

atmosphere and helps my runners' muscles become a lot more languid. My spirit begins to melt into God. Gentle dance-like Chinese qigong moves have prepared me for a period of sitting meditation. The small Asian gazebo-type structure, in which I sit in front of the monastery as I look down into the lush green valley below, feels womb-like. I cannot see the hermitages of the monks and nuns but know and sense the presence of the hermits who saturate the forest surrounding the monastery with their powerful energy. It is as if their qi, or life force, and mine have become one. This makes great sense since the Source of all qi, as I view things, is One—God, mediated in Christ. *In the beginning was the Dao.*

My vigil is held in complete silence. The monastic Office of Vigils in a Christian monastery is a liturgical service held in darkness, sometime before the dawn. During Vigils monastics all over the world celebrate the God who is about to break into their day once again, and the God who will come again at the end of time. It invites us to be open, prepared, gently watching and waiting for the Spirit to guide and enlighten us. *There I go again with "holy" thoughts that are keeping me from being quietly present.*

The calls of the large birds soaring above blend in with the brush of God's breath upon my face and arms. My spirit soars with the rest of God's creation. What a wonder to be here. Thank you, Jesus, for my friend, Ignatius. His parents, Mr. and Mrs. Lynn, must have had a premonition about his future vocational choice when then named him Ignatius. He joined the Society of Jesus, often simply called the "Jesuits," which was founded by his patron saint, Ignatius of Loyola.

*Slow down mind.* Let's get back to simply being in the presence of God. No need to think. You do enough of that at other times. *Breathe in; breathe out. Again, breathe in; breathe*

*out.* Sit at Christ's feet as the patrons of our monastery, Saint Francis de Sales and Saint Jane de Chantal suggest that we do. Prayer is simple; stop complicating it. Just listen.

Interesting parallel. I chose the monastic name Francis de Sales after our founder. My friend Ignatius and I have so much in common—the source of our names, our Christian religious vocations, though in different religious orders, and our love of Eastern spirituality. *Just be; just be; just be.*

Peaceful quiet, time and place no longer exist. Lost in the Void. No more thoughts.

AHHHHH!!! The whispered voice was a like clap of thunder. It was as if I were a lightning rod and the words had permeated every cell of my body the way a bolt of electricity making a jagged path through the sky could do.

The figure next to me *thought* more than said: “I want to take you to my hut in the woods.”

I was disoriented. Time had passed, but I didn't know how much time. I don't know why the voice of the short hermit monk with shaved head and gray tunic top and knicker-like pants did not send my physical body soaring right through the roof, but it didn't. The voice seemed to speak more to my *spirit* than to my ears. Oh well I thought, with a bit of the philosophical humor which I often use as a coping mechanism, he will either kill me or it will be fun.

“Thank you very much. I would love to see your hermitage.” *Did they have counterfeit hermits here in Asia?* I hoped not but really didn't care, my spirit of adventure was in gear. In minutes we were in the thick of the glistening green forest. The huge brightly colored stone archway behind us, which marks the entrance to the complex of monastic buildings, was no

longer visible. The ancient symbol of blessing in each top corner of the arch flashed into my mind. I recalled how Hitler twisted that symbol into a curse during the Nazi regime.

I would never find my way out of this maze and back to the monastery without an escort. Where are Hansel and Gretel when you need them? Anybody got any breadcrumbs? *Into your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit.*

*What is that? What is he saying?*

“...You are very involved in healing others. You are growing in your sense of adventure, and you love to do new things. Your world is expanding day by day. You are in our country to visit your friend and do some work for God.”

I missed most of what he had said but caught the latter comments. How did he know these things? We had never met and even the guestmaster knew very little about me. *He must be reading my qi.*

Qi is the life force, which keeps us in existence and sustains all things. It is primarily the qi that is worked with in Chinese medicine, the context or blueprint in which I practice as a medical qigong doctor. Qi radiates from us and can be perceived and understood and interpreted by another, especially after he or she has had training in meditation, Asian medicine, or prayer. This sort of intuitive reading is extremely helpful in the diagnosis and treatment of imbalances. In the West we would call them “disorders” or “illnesses.” The imbalance can be in body, mind, or spirit. Typically all three levels of being are influenced by a relatively larger imbalance in any one area.

The information gleaned from reading qi is not used exclusively to treat imbalances. Many times it helps us to understand ourselves or make positive life choices in harmony with



who we truly are. My mysterious and, hopefully, benign guide appears to be an expert in reading qi!

*Where is this hut anyway, on the next island?* We have been walking about fifteen minutes now. Glad I have my running shoes on. Yesterday helicopters clattered over the forest and landed to pick up the body of an old woman hermit who died in her hermitage after a lifetime of meditation. I wondered then what it looked like down here in the woods and now I was finding out. *Lord please don't let the helicopters come after me today!* The guestmaster became quite anxious when he saw the camera I was innocently carrying as the choppers fluttered above. Of course I would not take pictures of the event. Some cultures think that taking pictures is like stealing a part of the soul of the person being photographed.

Eventually we came upon a little house, more than a hut really, but simple and well kept. It had white plaster walls and was surrounded, actually almost swallowed up, with foliage. We entered through a dark brown door into a simple sitting room with a Buddha straight ahead against the back wall, and a small rectangular window on either side of the approximately four foot high gray statue. Although the sacred image could be viewed as oversized for the room by Western standards, there was still a lot of room to sit and visit in.

The mystery monk offered me a simple bamboo chair with cushions of green. I sat and he then placed a light blanket over my legs. It was slightly cool in the shaded hermitage, probably a chill radiating off of the concrete floor. He seemed to materialize a tea set out of thin air—a rectangular rosewood colored box with a red clay teapot and four small handleless cups on top. Soon the water on the little stove in the next room was boiling and my monastic brother was making green tea for us. It is ironic how green tea can make me feel at home halfway around the

world. The real feeling of “at homeness” comes from being with other monastics. I am rooted in Christ, he and his brothers and sisters in the Buddha, but we share common ground. As a qigong doctor, I know that green tea is not only refreshing, but that it is also used to prevent cancer and to heal from it. We Westerners are beginning to talk about antioxidants and their positive effect upon the immune system, but the Chinese have used green tea to a similar end for 5,000 years and observed its effects, along with the effects of the pharmacopoeia of other medicinal herbs they use.

We spoke of self-cultivation qigong, practice for self-healing and balance, and medical qigong, which is used in treating patients. Moving, breathing, and meditating, in the qigong fashion have helped me to move closer to Christ and have been a part of my personal spiritual life and ministry for many years now.

Slow on the up-take, I finally realized that I was in the presence of a real, honest to Buddha, qigong master! This was my longing in coming to Asia. Some friends were trying to set up a visit to someone on the main island of Hong Kong when I would get back there in a few days. This was spectacular. No one could have planned this. Here I was, on a remote island, in a hermitage with a qigong master. *Hmmm, he looks a little younger than I look.* Many of my teachers have been masters and for them I am deeply grateful. This was somehow different. It was as if Jesus were saying that he is coming to me through this master and thanking me for my faithfulness to him. *Thank you Jesus!* The God of surprises strikes again, and God comes in many forms, often in the person of another. God truly is a God of surprises—if we are open to them, as one retreat director told me many years ago. What a wise and discerning woman she was!

My monastic friend with shaven head made the tea, rinsed the cups with the first pour of the tea, discarded that into a little well in the wooden box-like tray upon which pot and cups rested, and then handed me a freshly poured cup as he made a deep bow from the waist. We sipped the warm and comforting liquid and the aroma wafting from the little cup relaxed me even more. *So far he's not a murderer.* Who cares anyway. How special to be bumped off by a master!

People sometimes ask me if my head is tonsured, shaven the way the early monastics did it as a sign of belonging to God. My host's head is shaven in that fashion. My tonsure is *genetic*—and thus allows for a horseshoe of silvery brown hair around the side and back of my head. It also allows for quick and easy haircuts that I can do by myself.

Teatime was over and we did some qigong on one another. I assessed the Buddhist monk's twelve major meridians, actually the pulses that move through them, and found them to be very open, healthy, and flowing. Acupuncture, and the meridians associated with that healing practice, was “discovered” by the West during the 70s after a member of the press corps of President Nixon's entourage in China took ill. The appendix of the journalist was removed using acupuncture as the anesthesia. That event opened Eastern medicine up to the West. The only downside was that Westerners became rather myopic, equating acupuncture alone with Chinese medicine, and it is so very much more than just that.

Even though most Westerners grew up with only a single pulse being taken by a Western doctor or nurse, many Westerners are beginning to become familiar with acupuncturists taking the twelve pulses on the wrists prior to inserting the hair-like needles into the body of the patient to facilitate the flow of qi in the meridians. Years of study with women and men masters, often

in addition to more formalized schooling with other classmates, and much clinical experience, just begin to impart the subtleties and intricacies of Chinese medicine.

Whether the novice doctor uses Chinese medicinal herbs, *tui na* (Chinese medical massage), acupuncture, or any other modality as a specialty, the mind and spirit of the doctor need to be *imbued* with the blueprint of Chinese medicine. This physical, psychological, and spiritual blueprint is much like the concept of a hologram as taught in the science of physics. Each part of creation, take human DNA as an illustration, contains the whole of the DNA. Continuing with this example, if we change any one part of our DNA, we change the entire structure for better or for worse. A true understanding of this model of health can certainly not occur when a Western doctor takes a weekend crash course in acupuncture, medicinal herbs, or Chinese massage, even if he or she is well trained in another Western healing modality.

Practitioners of medical qigong, unlike acupuncturists, often take the twelve pulses by placing one hand near the organ being diagnosed while the other hand lightly grasps the fingertip or toe associated with that organ meridian. In qigong fashion, I used the fingers and toes for meridian and organ diagnosis. The organs are all paired: heart and small intestine, pericardium and triple burner (the trunk of the body), spleen and stomach, lungs and large intestine, kidneys and bladder, liver and gall bladder. My positive diagnosis of this very special man's body, mind, and spirit balance did not seem to be much of a bulletin to him. Next he gave me a treatment. I sat in a chair in the center of the room. Buddha watched in serene silence. My host started to take off my running shoes and socks. My Chinese medical training taught me to ask or suggest things to a patient prior to any procedure and give the patient lots of privacy. He just did whatever he thought necessary. Another wonder crossed my mind but I realized that I was not

dead yet so maybe this will turn out well also, and began to help the master. He stopped me, telling me very seriously that he must do this.

The master monk began to move his hands around my body at first, then physically massaged my spine and shoulders, and then he pressed on the sole of each of my feet. Just to make some conversation, I mentioned that the name of that spot is called the “Bubbling Spring.”

He quietly said to me: “You know.”

I responded with: “A little.”

The little monk shot back with: “*You are a master.*” *At least I hope that’s what he said!*

## Chapter 2

BELTZVILLE LAKE, POCONO MOUNTAINS, PENNSYLVANIA, Present day. The two rumped guys in the battered van looked like the characters from the childhood comic strip “Mutt and Jeff.” The driver was tall and thin with lanky limb movements that made every bone in his body appear to jiggle like a Halloween skeleton; the sidekick was short and round looking, like a big wooden top one could wrap a string around and pull on to make him spin. No one seems to remember which character was tall (Mutt) and which one was short (Jeff), but the two of them were definitely a bumbling and laughable combo in the comic strips in the Sunday morning papers--and the same was the case with the present real life duet. Jeff chomped on Cheez Twists and yelled: “Can’t you get this bucket of bolts to go any faster?” One might think that his eating was somehow related to trying to get the car to speed up. The faster he ate, the more he became agitated that the old van merely lumbered along.

“Go faster? I can’t even get it to keep from pulling to the right. One false move and

we're both in a ditch," Mutt replied in the same jaded and negative tone as his partner. The sound of Mutt's voice revealed years of practiced frustration with Jeff. "When we get there we need to creep in *very* quietly, then you put the rag over his mouth and we'll drag him into the back of the van--and put that knife away! We don't plan on murdering him; this is just a kidnapping." Mutt sounded more like an adolescent actor in a high school play than a genuine kidnapper.

"What? Just a kidnapping? You're no fun. Where is your spirit of adventure? There's lots we can do besides snatching him."

Meanwhile, a whisper of light from the setting sun, magnified by the campfire in front of him, silhouetted a lean male figure in his mid-twenties. He sat cross-legged, like an ascetic Buddha figure, the fire danced between him and the water, which lapped in gentle pulses in front of him. The dry wood of the fire snapped, crackled, and popped with a noisy peacefulness. Blotches of white snow dappled the sand around him and the tall brown grass behind him. It was mild for mid-December and his down-filled parka, heavy blue jeans, and hiking boots keep him warm enough, especially now that the fire was roaring hot.

The nightmares had finally stopped. The re-runs of being chased, then trying to strangle the one who chased him were so very dystonic to his gentle person. Screaming in the night had disturbed his very soul. What a blessed relief. Marriage could have been wonderful but Someone had something else in mind. *Let me not run from the love which you offer; Let me not run from the love which you offer; Let me not run from the love which you offer.* Although he was much more of a meditator than he was a person given to vocal prayers, this line from his favorite vocal prayer kept echoing through his healing mind. He prayed the whole "Soul of

Christ<sup>1</sup>” prayer, which was attributed to Saint Ignatius Loyola:

“Jesus, may all that is you flow into me.

May your body and blood be my food and drink.

May your passion and death be my strength and life.

Jesus, with you by my side enough has been given.

May the shelter I seek be the shadow of your cross.

*Let me not run from the love which you offer,*

But hold me safe from the forces of evil.

On each of my dyings shed your light and your love.

Keep calling to me until that day comes,

When, with your saints, I may praise you forever. Amen.”

The silhouette dancing on the ground before him let out a deep and tranquil sigh as he returned to the use of his mantra, or mental tool used in prayer and meditation, over and over again, in rhythm with his breathing. He had finally stopped running and now was more than ready to commit. He longed for it. The fear was gone and he was free at last. The use of a word or line from a prayer repeated over and over had become such a help for him in clearing his mind and in sensing his connection with his Mother / Father in heaven. The young camper had used one line at a time from the Soul of Christ prayer as a mantra day by day for several months now. He had been taught well and was deeply grateful for all that he had been given. Life was indeed good. The God of surprises was in charge. *All is gift.*

Mutt and Jeff slammed their van doors shut and yelled at one another for being too noisy. The pair seemed to blame each other for just about everything that went wrong. Personal responsibility was not the strong suit of either member of this team. Mutt smacked the knife out of Jeff's hand and it landed on the ground with a dull thud.

"Hey, I got that in the Cub Scouts" whined Jeff, regressing to eight years old. "What did you do that for?"

"That was several decades ago, you blockhead," responded his partner in crime. Jeff scrambled around in the dark for the knife like Linus looking for his blanket. When he finally found it, the two crept through the woods toward the campfire, getting slapped in the face, chest, arms, and legs by pine branches along the way. There are those who think that the movie title "Dumb and Dumber" might be a better name for the team than the comic strip Mutt and Jeff! The movie title comment is more a reflection on the members of this odd couple not taking responsibility for their own behaviors, their lack of self-reflection, lack of sensitivity, and has nothing to do with IQ.

The tender noise from the campfire, along with the rhythmic lapping of the water at the lakeside, masked the sounds the two klutzes generated as the crept up behind their contemplative prey. The camper knew that someone was behind him, but something within told him that he was protected, and that this was all part of a larger plan. He was learning to listen well to his intuition. Normally, he would have been a great deal more practical, that is, get out of there, but this time he didn't move an inch. He just kept breathing in and breathing out. It was as if he were breathing all of the stars and the endless sky in and out as he did so. *Let me not run from the love which you offer. Let me not run from the love which you offer.*



Well, the camper didn't run and the next thing he realized was that someone was holding a smelly rag over his mouth and nose. Before long he was somewhere out there, far beyond the stars and the sky, not only spiritually but also in terms of his central nervous system. Shortly thereafter, oblivion set in with darkness deeper than the night. Time and space ceased to exist for the captive.

"Grab his legs," Mutt shouted into the flickering darkness as he struggled with the deadweight of the upper body of their lanky victim whose lean and healthy muscle mass added weight to his body.

"His feet must be size twelve," Jeff distractedly observed, not keeping his mind on the task at hand, taking his time to observe their victim."

"No they're not, mine are about the same size. You just have little tiny feet. You look like a Bobo doll—weighted on the bottom and popping up again when someone pushes you down. Also, I might add, full of hot air. Now grab that Bible, or whatever it is over there near the fire."

Thud, crunch, smack, cut, sting. Bumbling through the foliage, the three set off. Two of them were willing and one was unconscious. They slid the side door of the van open and threw their captive into the vehicle. The old and battered van chugged out onto Beltzville Road again and headed toward Mount Pocahontas. Dense pine trees and even denser darkness surrounded them. Fortunately, although the woods were thick with deer, none ventured across the roads in front of them, an event which causes frequent accidents in the Poconos. The van would probably fall apart on impact from the deer, even a gentle one like Bambi!

"We did it, we did it, we did it," chanted Mutt. Jeff continued eating his Cheez Twists,

orange speckles sprinkling his jacket and the floor of the vehicle.

### Chapter 3

The two monks enjoyed another round of tea as they continued bonding; this time it was red tea that they drank. The flavor was a bit more pungent than the green tea and produced a more invigorating feeling. Francis sighed with intense appreciation for the wonderful adventure that he was having with someone he had just met and whom he seemed to have known forever. After more Chinese medicine talk, and the wondrous sharing of some ancient secrets by *Si*, the two prepared to depart from the hermitage. Francis called his new friend “*Si*,” which is short for *Sifu*, meaning teacher. This title is much like the term “Rabbi” as it relates to the concept of teacher. Jesus was often called by both titles, teacher and Rabbi.

I was grateful that “huts” in the woods had clean bathrooms. Too much tea! *Si* placed the tea set in the tiny kitchen and as I folded the blanket that had been placed on my legs by my gracious and unusual host.

It is a delight to be walking with this gray-clad man. There is something very peaceful yet very alive about him. It must be from the qi that he seems to be bursting with. We passed several other little houses buried deep in the heart of the woods and almost invisible. One very ancient and tiny dwelling seemed to call to me. I knew in my heart that it was the one where the older lady hermit had died the day before. Before I could ask, *Si* simply nodded in response after reading my spirit. We were both quiet for a few moments, each praying in his own way, yet praying together.

Because of my Catholic Christian belief in the Mystical Body, that we are all one in

Christ, I often pray to and for the souls of those who have died. I wondered about the soul of this recently deceased hermit, and what the transition from this life to the next is like. My mind went off on a brief tangent to the possibility of haunted houses and the spirit world.

Before very long *Si* and I reached a huge precipice hanging out over a vast canyon, the edges of which could not be seen by the naked eye. It was beautifully terrifying and I felt like it was too much for me to take in all at once. Before I could absorb what I was experiencing, *Si* tiptoed out onto, in my estimation, the edge of the earth. His movements made him appear to be lighter than the air that was swirling around us like a funnel, the windy phenomenon probably a result of the vastness of the canyon and the open space above and below us. *Surrender Dorothy!*

My Buddhist friend started to move effortlessly through various timeless qigong forms. Some of these were new to me, and others I recognized as very ancient forms that are a part of my own qigong repertoire. At times he looked like a bird in flight, then like a tree bending in the breeze, or a cloud changing form in the sky. Next *Si* went through a series of moves whereby he took on the appearance of flowing water and then emerald willows waving at a lakeside.

“Come out here my American brother and absorb the qi from nature. Take it in from the trees and the sky. Become one with it. Let it heal you so that you may continue to heal others. Let Jesus work through you. He is your only healer.”

Humbled and impressed by this master’s insight into my own Christian spirituality, but still intimidated by the scene, I shouted back “Can’t I just watch from land? All I need is enough qi to get me back to the monastery. *Maybe he is going to murder me after all! Do I hear helicopters?*”

What terrifying exhilaration I experienced as I gingerly moved out a smidgen on to the

precipice. I was not going too far, of that much I was certain. I did a little qigong, looking more like the tin man from *The Wizard of Oz* than a graceful master who had just been initiated as such by the dancing spirit-man who was my guide during this time spent between two worlds.

Anyone who had previously thought I was graceful in doing qigong would not think so now. The tin man definitely needed to be oiled; calling AAA might be an even more helpful idea!

“That’s just great *Si*; I’ll go back now.” *Please* let me go back now. He was lost in his mystical movements as I began to make my escape to *terra firma*. Huge birds, reminding me of the mythical and powerful Asian bird, the *Roc*, circled overhead. *Maybe they were just buzzards waiting for lunch.*

I slid to safety on my posterior; my host floated in after me a few moments later, clearly wanting to stay on the edge for the rest of the day. *Heights are okay as long as there is a flight attendant around. If someone had offered me a bag of those little pretzels—or a bowl of noodles like on China Air—I would have been fine. No problem!*

When *Si* started saying something about the foxes turning into humans I thought it was probably time to return to the monastery. Being a trained scientist at heart, even I have my limits. I must have missed that lesson in my years of Traditional Chinese Medicine training. We passed several other hermitages and before I knew it I was at the foot of a path that led to the monastery where my journey into forest had begun. The master joined his hands in front of his heart and bowed to me as he whispered a passage from the classic Daoist text, the *Dao De Jing*.<sup>2</sup>

“Thirty spokes converge upon a single hub;

It is on the hole in the center that the use of the cart hinges.

We make a vessel from a lump of clay;  
It is the empty space within the vessel that makes it useful.  
We make doors and windows for a room;  
But it is these empty spaces that make the room livable.  
Thus, while the tangible has advantages,  
It is the intangible that makes it useful.”

He slipped away just as silently as he had appeared much earlier that day. “Thank you,” I whispered, knowing that he hears more with his heart than with his ears.

I lingered at that crossroad for some time, I know not how long. Time and space remained suspended. Eventually I walked at a snail's pace along the path which took me back to the front of the monastery buildings and the place where I was quietly meditating when *Si* first magically appeared in the stillness of the early morning. My mind was racing at that time. Ironically, even after my once in a lifetime adventure with my new friend, my mind was now tranquil and crystal clear. I was one with the universe. Past and future no longer clouded the present moment, no longer tugged me in one direction or the other.

My mystical travels with *Si* went so much better than the experience I had when I first got here to the monastery, when I was solemnly ushered into a large reception hall to meet the grandmaster. Here I was in Asia, in a Buddhist monastery, and about to meet the master of the many men and women masters who live here. Here he comes now, the master of masters.

The guestmaster and I, along with several of the monastics from the community who were also with us, stood up when he entered. An older monk, swathed with yellow robes so loose

and flowing that his hands were not visible, silently and serenely entered the hall, escorted by yet another monk, taller and of middle-years, with the classic shaven head of the *Chan* monks and nuns. The wisdom of the ages radiated from his peaceful face. His persona was serious, but underneath it I sensed a bottomless compassion, and a strength honed by a life of prayer, study, and leadership.

A translator introduced us, using both English and Chinese. The grandmaster extended his robed arm, a bolt of yellow fabric floating through the air. I shook his hand. We stood there silently for a moment. He extended his covered hand once again. I shook it again. We went through the same moves once more. *Maybe they do things like the Orthodox Christians—three times each. Once more, then I really have to go!* The guestmaster rescued me from my confused analysis of what might be happening by whispering to me that the grandmaster wanted me to sit in a chair. The grandmaster was simply pointing to a chair. I didn't need to shake his hand even one time, let alone three times! *I can do this.* We sat down. Everyone was quiet. *Now what? I think that I am supposed to ask the grandmaster some question so he can teach me something. Let's keep it simple.*

“What is the meaning of enlightenment?” I blurted out. *So much for simplicity.*

The rhythmic alteration between the Chinese and English languages was as beautiful as the content of the words the grandmaster conveyed through the interpreter. “Living in the present moment and doing the duties of our state in life is enlightenment,” said the ageless older man. This teaching is identical to the teachings of Saint Francis de Sales and Saint Jane de Chantal. When one is in the presence of Truth, no matter what the language or cultural context it is packaged in, it is so very obvious. What joy. It was worth the three unnecessary handshakes

through the yards of fabric making up the yellow robe.

We next left the reception hall and went next door to the meditation hall. I was asked to climb a small ladder and look down into a reliquary in front of a larger than life Buddha. This went much better. In the golden cup-like bowl was what looked like a small opaque gem of some type. It was explained to me that when bodies are cremated, they sometimes leave bits and pieces behind in the ashes. *Now there's a picture.* Anyway, the remaining “gems” vary in color and size and are looked upon as precious relics of the person who passed over. This orange gem was a relic of a venerable member of the community who had moved on.

The grandmaster asked me what color I saw as I observed the relic. I had to ask the translator to repeat the question, like on a TV quiz show, because the answer seemed so obvious to me. It was clearly orange and I told them all as much. *Final answer.* That seemed to get me lots of points for some reason. There was a great deal of head nodding and positive-sounding Chinese words. I later learned that, depending on where one is on his or her spiritual journey, one will see different colors suggestive of that place when looking at a relic. *Orange is good.* It appeared that I had been redeemed from my earlier hand-shaking blunder.

As I walked back to my monastic cell pondering the events of the last few days, an older nun walked up to me. Her silver hair was shorn close to her head and her baggy gray robe flapped around her. She smiled warmly at me and handed me a traditional red envelope with some money in it. We did not speak the earthly language of one another but I understood her message. *If I do not see you again in this life, we will meet in the next.* When the guestmaster came by to bid me farewell I asked him what I could do to repay the nun who gave me the going away present. “Just live the *Tao*,” was his wise response. *That was the second red envelope*

*given to me since I got here. The other one was at my place in the dining hall, next to my bowl and chopsticks. Maybe I'll stick around. The envelopes at home usually contain bills.*

Not wanting to leave, but wanting to see my friend Ignatius again so as to share my adventures with my wise and wonderful soul-brother, I walked to the path leading through the woods in a somewhat conflicted state of mind. It would take me about half an hour to walk to the “Big Buddha” in the clearing outside the forest I was in, where I would visit for a while on my trek back to Cheung Chau Island and the Jesuit retreat center where I was staying. Armed with a large black umbrella Ignatius gave me to use to ward off wild dogs, I walked through the woods. *Inwardly I transitioned from the tin man to the scarecrow. Toto better not give me any grief; I have an umbrella.*

#### Chapter 4

Hester delighted in spending time at the Salesian Monastery in Brodheadsville, Pennsylvania. Her life was changing rapidly and the wisdom and stability the little monastery provided her with was deeply treasured by this evolving woman. During her present stay, the nocturnal Office of Vigils had just ended with the usual mantra of “Come, Lord Jesus,” and the morning star and daybreak would follow soon behind.

The life of this monastery, like any other monastic community large or small, flows around the rhythm of prayer called “The Divine Office” which is also known by a more contemporary title as “The Liturgy of the Hours.” The various liturgical prayer services that make up the Office consecrate all of the phases of the day and night to God. Monastic tradition holds that Vigils is to be celebrated by the community in the dark, the night before, in the middle



of the night, or sometime before dawn. Since some of the monastics at the Salesian Monastery go out to minister part-time in the area, and a middle of the night wake-up call might leave them fatigued as their day progresses, the pre-dawn option is the tradition at the Salesian Monastery.

The still, cold, and quiet mid-December morning exhilarated Hester. She left the oratory (the monastic term for chapel, from the Latin *ora* or prayer) and headed up the small brown / green rock laden path, planning to do a walking meditation around the five acre field dominating the white monastic buildings. Such a meditation was good for her body as well as her soul, she reasoned. Besides, walking meditation is a venerated tradition in Eastern spirituality.

Westerners think primarily of sitting still or, worse yet, configuring the physical body into the shape of a pretzel, as the proper postures for meditation. This woman had read the great Spanish Carmelite mystic, Saint Theresa of Avila, who suggests that the meditator exercise great freedom in his or her meditation position, including sitting comfortably if that is helpful in prayer. Hester understood that if one lies down to meditate, there is a chance that the person could simply fall asleep. This is not a bad thing, but not the purpose of mental prayer, which really is uniting oneself with God.

Dry and frosted weeds, about knee high, crunched under her prayerful feet and sturdy shoes. Time was suspended as the tall, angular woman in her mid-forties walked the perimeter of the field praying “Come Lord Jesus, Come Lord Jesus, Come Lord Jesus” over and over again. An almost imperceptible glint from the ground beneath her attracted her half-closed eyes and, even more powerfully, her inner spirit. This woman missed *nothing*. This was not by her choice so much as by her neurological wiring. In general, Hester had the reputation of being very close-mouthed and prudent, someone who minded her own business. The sun was barely rising, but

the angle of the sunrays gave just enough light for something to gleam in response to the stream of sunlight splashing down at her feet.

Without even consciously thinking about it, Hester stooped down and began to poke around in the half-frozen mud. *Something that bright and shiny has got to be a diamond.* Sure enough, she was right, which even surprised her, given the scanty amount of data to draw upon to reach her hypothesis. The only disconcerting thing is that it was on a ring, and the ring was on what appeared to be a young, feminine hand—a very dead hand.

No scream left Hester's slim pale lips, only an inner burst of anger at only God knew who, and the thought that *this finding bodies stuff has got to stop!* When the chilling reality finally made its way through her circuitry and into her consciousness it was like someone throwing back the curtains on a bright day while someone else is still sleeping in bed after getting there late. Hester opened her eyes and darted back down the hill she had so tranquilly climbed not long before, to the main monastery building, conscious that it was still the "Grand Silence" during which no one was supposed to talk unless there was an emergency. She knew that this constituted a grave enough emergency to break the Grand Silence.

## Chapter 5

Hester's sensible shoes could barely contain her feet as she ran down the path from the plateau of land behind the monastery. That acreage was owned by someone in the area but had been left unused for many years now. It now appeared that someone *had* indeed been using it, and not for anything good. In recent months Hester's world had been turned upside down. Her worldview was also becoming more and more disoriented. She was questioning everything, even

her relationship with the Church. She often recalled Abbot Francis quoting an age-old Eastern proverb as they spoke together once in his sunlit office: “Confusion precedes enlightenment.”

This woman was always a lady, even as she ran down the path and almost literally turned upside down as her left foot tripped over a rock. She ran right up the front steps of the main building of the little monastery, through the foyer, and into the community room bellowing, “Sisters, Brothers, there’s been another death.” Sister Jane de Chantal came up from the basement level, Brother Benedict came out of the guest room on the first floor in which he had been meditating, and Sister Scholastica came out of the sunroom. None of them, understandably, seemed to comprehend the meaning of Hester’s strange message.

Brother Benedict spoke with a calm reflecting the Grand Silence: “What is it you’re trying to tell us, Hester?”

“Just what I said, Brother, there’s been another death. Follow me. Please follow me at once.”

Hester marched out the front door with more calm and assurance than she had when she ran in through it only minutes before. The support of her monastic friends gave her strength once again. The three monastics followed her in what appeared to be a caricature of a liturgical procession. They walked up the hill, some with more ease and balance than others, and turned right on the grassy uneven field. Hester knelt down and gently touched a muddy human hand reaching out from below the earth. This sight was like a wake up call, bringing them all to life. The three monastics, who had maintained their religious decorum up to this point, now lost it completely. They ran back down the hill, and Brother Benedict went straight to the phone on the wall in the community room and called the state police.

*When all else fails, make tea.* Sister Jane de Chantal filled the kettle with the cold well water which flowed out of the tap in the kitchen sink. She then placed it on the gas stove and turned the front right burner on with exaggerated calmness. When the abbot was away, Sister Jane de Chantal, as prioress of the community, was in charge. *I can do this.* The nun next announced that the normal community schedule would be suspended for a little while, until everyone concerned was able to make sense out of the recent occurrences. They would probably pick up with their communal prayers at Daytime Prayer at the noon hour. That would be a good way to stabilize things once again.

Daytime Prayer is the shortest of the liturgical Offices, taking only about ten minutes and consisting of three psalms, a short reading from scripture, and a closing prayer. In larger monasteries, it is often said out in the fields, in the bakery, the laundry, or wherever community members are working. The service is a sort of spiritual oasis during the business of the day. A busy life, or even a death, need not keep us from remembering God's gentle presence. Musings over, Sister Jane de Chantal unnecessarily wiped the kitchen counter about three times.

Sister Scholastica was only in monastic life a few years and of a calmer temperament than her sister, Jane de Chantal. This was the third dead body that someone related to the community had been associated with. She really believed that God had given her a vocation to the Salesian Monastic Community, but she did not realize that the "death and rising" modeled by Christ that is an on-going part of monastic consecration, would involve so many *human* bodies. The death and rising spoken of in Christian theology for all who follow Christ more often dealt with a cycle of letting go so that New Life could enter in. The letting go typically expressed itself in dying to self-will, and attachment to things and situations, not physically dead bodies.

A strange calm overtook Sister Scholastica. Perhaps it was a grace given to her so that she could cope with these events, a pure gift of God to get her through everything. This is often referred to as “grace of state.” She busied herself by taking a group of mismatched mugs out of the cupboard and putting some cream and sugar on the table. She added some pink and blue packets of sugar substitute for those who needed a placebo to help them think that they were doing something healthy for themselves. The entire “tea ceremony” was really quite unnecessary because the coffee machine had clicked on as scheduled and began to make the usual pot of decaffeinated coffee for the community’s breakfast. The beverages heated up as the group began to cool down.

The male members of the community, along with any men who came to the monastery as guests, slept in the men’s guesthouse on the other side of the gravel driveway. The crunch of the driveway stones was better than a watchdog. Not a man or woman came or went, on foot or by car, without someone in the household hearing the gravel announce the arrival. All of the members used the main community building during the day to eat in, recreate in, meditate in, and in general lead their lives in. The large white house with barn red porch was purchased from the original owners, who built the dwelling, shortly after the community was first established and while the original member was living in smaller quarters. The group began to collect itself mentally and physically. Brother Benedict was wondering where Brother Matthew was. It’s not like him to miss community prayer--or a murder, if that is what it was.

The shaken little group heard the crunch of gravel on the driveway as two white Pennsylvania state police cars, sporting a bar of flashing lights on their rooftops, drove up and parked in front of the steps leading to the red porch and the main house. The officers were very

familiar with the fact that the monastery was in their neighborhood and they, along with many people in the area, were grateful for the presence of this peaceful community and all that it stood for.

Monastic communities witness to the fact that there is something more in existence than what the world has to offer, and this silent homily was something the area was very glad to have, especially during hard times. The monks and nuns for their part tried to emphasize that all things are good, in “the world” or in the monastery, and that it was through the good use of things, time, and talent that the world could be made better. Monastic life was just one way of following God. Vocations to the single life, the married life, and the clergy were just as holy and in need of respect and support as well.

Trooper Bradley Jonas, who had been to several yard sales at the monastery, led the other officers in. He looked like a big teddy bear with very intelligent eyes, not like the usual teddy bear eyes, which make the bear appear like his or her medication needed some adjusting. The troopers doffed their Smokey the Bear hats as they entered and visually and emotionally took in every inch of the place. Trooper Jonas was the soul of tranquility and competence. “Good morning, everyone. I understand there is something you would like us to take a look at,” he boomed with his usual straightforward phrasing.

“There certainly is, Trooper Jonas. There is a body buried in a shallow muddy grave on the back hill,” responded Hester in as clear and competent a voice as she was able to muster. If it were under calmer circumstances, an observer might get the impression that Hester’s heart was beating more quickly in response to an amorous attraction rather than to the dead body she discovered earlier that morning.

“And you are?” the teddy bear said in response to Hester.

“Hester Von Kiel, Trooper Jonas. I am a friend of the community. I come here often to celebrate the Office, you know, the chanting of the Liturgy of the Hours, and to meditate. I live nearby and came here earlier this morning to pray. I went out to walk in the field above the monastery, and there I found a feminine hand protruding out of the mud.”

Trooper Jonas looked at the monastics gathered there and simply nodded to them in a non-verbal way as if to ask them to corroborate what the woman was saying if they could. They nodded back just as simply. The state policeman then asked Hester to lead them back to the sight where the body was found, which she did with great solemnity. The original group marched up the hill once again, this time in the company of the state police officers, and Hester took them all to the place where she first discovered the hand protruding out of the muddy ground. *Could this have all been a nightmare? An hallucination? Would the hand still be there?* The hand was still there—a mixed blessing.

The trooper’s mind started assessing the present situation, taking mental pictures, calculating what he was seeing, and forming initial hypotheses. The hand was young, fair, and left. A diamond ring was on the ring finger. A pool of muddy water surrounded the hand. The recent rains had probably washed away the mud from that area. Then a terrifying thought struck him. *What if she were buried alive and was trying to get out of her makeshift grave.*

Another car rumbled up the driveway and in reaction to that event Trooper Jonas bellowed down to the stately looking black woman with short black hair barely tinged with silver who was exiting the car. “We’re up here, Dr. Swift,” he hollered through megaphone-shaped hands. His powerful voice contrasted with his gentle demeanor. She looked up without any hint

of being startled, grabbed a large leather bag from the back seat, and walked toward them. This woman had obviously seen much in her career and appeared to be gathering her strength together for her next dose of reality.

The sun was shining brightly now through the skeletal trees and the birds were singing in a riotous chorus. Their music stood in stark counterpoint to the events which were unfolding. Trooper Jonas asked the community and Hester to leave the area for a while, but not to leave the monastery grounds until he and his colleagues had a chance to speak with them more thoroughly. They trekked downward and into the community kitchen to have some breakfast and process the events that they had unwittingly become a party to. There was more than enough tea and coffee for everyone.

Police radios and cell phones beckoned for more help as church bells from the area houses of worship pealed in the background. An investigational team, complete with a photographer, and a forensic expert with equipment, including plaster for making footprint molds, plastic baggies, and other assorted paraphernalia, joined the professionals on the grounds overlooking what was usually a tranquil monastic property. After what seemed like hours to Hester and the others, a morose procession carried a body down the hill to the waiting vehicle. The birds became strangely silent, as did the church bells.

## Chapter 6

Mutt and Jeff, a.k.a., Dumb and Dumber, rattled up to the dismal weather-beaten farmhouse in the Poconos. Their contemplative captive bounced bruisingly around in the back of the van, groaning in a mildly merciful half-sleep reverie. The team of more than klutzy



kidnappers opened the door of the van and dragged out the lanky somnolent body from the vehicle. They had no intent to cause pain, but were also far from gentle. Their mindlessness seemed to cover every aspect of their behavior, including the way they were treating their captive. They could learn much from the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, who teaches and writes about the art of *mindfulness*—awareness of life as we move through it. Walking meditations, breathing meditations, and a philosophy of life that sees all as sacred make life more meaningful for the monk’s many followers throughout the world. Thich Nhat Hanh lives in France, in exile from his country of origin, but believes that wherever we are is home if we come to terms with our true self and the world around us.

Mutt had his hands under the armpits of their hostage and Jeff held the slim bony ankles of the young man. They climbed a few wooden steps made out of partially-rotted wood and opened a rickety screen door, then pushed open a heavier misaligned front door. The three moved through a living room, a place that would embarrass a thrift shop. The furnishings looked like something from an “early Halloween” motif, with rugs and slipcovers from the “one size fits all” rack. Everything was ancient, moldy, and in decay.

They went into what had probably once been a study or den on the first floor of the house, and laid the body on the floor in accord with their version of gently. There was an old threadbare rug on the scarred hardwood flooring whose colors were long since faded. Two bright new silver chains were bolted into the plaster and horsehair wall. Mutt took the end of one chain and looped it around the ankle of their victim and padlocked it in place. He did the same with the other chain on the other ankle of the stupefied young man. The chains were loose enough on the ankles so that blood could circulate, but not so loose that the chains could be removed. The

room, which had now become a prison cell, also contained a makeshift shower and bathroom. It appeared that this luxury was recently and hastily created with plywood and junk materials. The chains which, were secured into the wall and connected to the ankles of the young man, were long enough for him to move around in the room and get to the facilities, but not long enough for him to leave the room itself.

“Wow, this is great. You really thought of everything, didn’t you?” chattered Jeff in an excited manner.

“Of course I did, what do you take me for?” Their ego games and put downs were the horsehair holding the plaster of their relationship together.

The team of jailers stood up and left the room, closing the door behind them with a thud. They were both badly out of shape and feeling the strain of their recent exertion. Mutt asked Jeff to guard their prisoner. “We need to take turns. There’ll be times when neither of us can be here, but let’s try to have one or the other of us here whenever possible. I’ll go back to the family now and spend the night. I’ll go to church with them in the morning and make up some excuse to leave later, and then I’ll come back here to relieve you. How’s that?”

Jeff, always hungry, thought for a few minutes. “Sounds okay to me. Make sure that you bring me some food. We don’t have much here.”

Meanwhile, in the next room: *One of my favorite hymns is “How can I keep from singing?” The song that’s going through my head right now is “How can I keep from spinning?”* A whirling slide show of colorful sunsets, crackling campfires, gurgling water, bumpy roads, harsh voices, and black and blue marks filled his mind and reminded his body that he still was very alive.

The young monk struggled to orient himself to time and place. He remained confident in the teaching of the English anchoress from the middle ages, Julian of Norwich. She taught at the height of the plague that took most of her family and friends, and almost got her also, that *all would be well*.

## Chapter 7

The cracker-jack coroner for Monroe County did the autopsy herself. Flashes of brown and pink floated over the body as she moved her skillful and well-practiced hands through the reverent ritual of a post-mortem autopsy. Trooper Jonas stood near her, intently listening with every sense organ, including his sixth sense, and observing even the smallest movement of the doctor. This was without a doubt not his favorite pastime; there was so much he could be doing elsewhere. He knew, however, that every single detail, every little fragment of vital evidence, was crucial in solving a case. The Pennsylvania state trooper also understood that the sooner one follows up on information, the more likely one is to solve the crime. The trail gets closed very easily and very quickly. He and his colleagues were now in the midst of a marathon. Every minute counted.

After the autopsy was complete, Dr. Swift verbally summarized her findings. Much of them had been dictated in bits and pieces into a recorder through a microphone hanging from the ceiling throughout the course of the procedure. “We have here, Trooper Jonas, a young Caucasian woman, probably in her mid-twenties. She has been shot through the heart. I’ll leave it up to your ballistics people to assess and confirm the type of firearm, but it was obviously a rifle that could easily kill a person. Average height and weight, no remarkable scars from trauma

or surgery. Medium length brown hair. Brown eyes. There are no defense wounds or signs that she tried to defend herself in any way. It looks as if the shooting was a complete surprise to her. No signs of struggle. The victim had no jewelry on other than what appears to be an engagement ring. I'm sorry to say there was no identification of any type in her clothing."

"Thank you for your help, Dr. Swift. Your clear and crisp information is always a big help. We are grateful. I know you will send in a formal report later and I will study that as well. In the meantime, I will alert the media and see if we can find out who this poor girl was. I'll keep in touch."

"Sounds good, Trooper Jonas. By the way, that's quite an interesting crowd you've gotten yourself involved with this time—the folks at the monastery I mean. You know, I sometimes have Catholic leanings." The pathologist took on a wistful smile. "When we were growing up, my sisters and brothers and I used to say that there was just too much sweatin', clappin', and jumpin' around for us at church. But now that I am a little older, I know that I would miss it very much if that form of worship were denied me. There sure isn't much of that sort of action around the morgue, I'll tell you that! Forgive me. That digression was just a little reality check to help me keep my feet on the ground. I knew it would be okay with you"

"I can well understand, Doctor Swift," said the smiling trooper. He imagined this bright and attractive lady as a young girl trying to behave in church, maybe helping to keep her brothers in line. *Am I a chauvinist? Why wouldn't she try to keep her sisters in line too?* "We both see some pretty horrible things in our work. It's good to keep a sense of humor and to share a few good memories once in a while. By the way," he continued with an outright laugh at this point, "there's not much sweatin', clappin', and jumpin' around at the Salesian Monastery either!"

They gave one another a gentle and supportive momentary glance, and Trooper Jonas took his leave.

The evening news contained the breaking story, as did the early and late editions of the local newspapers the next day. The state police barracks was flooded with phone calls, telephones blinking and beeping throughout the day. Some of the calls were simply crank calls while others, sadly, were from people who had lost loved ones and were desperately trying to find them. The serious callers were greatly conflicted, wanting closure for their missing loved ones but not wanting them to be found dead.

One call was from a man who had just returned from Divine Liturgy at the Byzantine Catholic Church with his family and was not certain where his daughter was at present. She was a student at DeSales University in Center Valley, Pennsylvania and had her own life. Maybe the young woman was out enjoying herself and visiting a friend, but he couldn't get in contact with her on the phone and the media stories unsettled him. Family came first for him; he would do anything for his family members.

The father of the college girl felt a little uneasy placing the call but thought he would be better safe than sorry, so he contacted the police with his concerns. They asked him to fax or to drop off a picture of his daughter and said that they would be in touch with him. The caller was tired and had muscle aches because he had been out late the night before doing some heavy-duty work with a friend. He didn't want to alarm his wife about the slim possibility of their daughter being missing, so he merely mentioned that he was going out for a few hours of hiking in the woods and would be back later. On his way to the old farmhouse he dropped off a photo of his daughter Christi at the state police barracks.

## Chapter 8

Hester sat in the pastor's cozy study. A small window made up of nine smaller windows looked out onto the parking lot and the daycare children at play on a plot of grass adjacent to it. An assortment of youngsters in various shapes, sizes, colors, and religions hung from modern day monkey bars and brightly colored sliding boards. An ecumenical collection of spiritual books lined the shelves within the room, some of them lying sideways on top of the upright ones in order to squeeze in a few extra volumes here and there. Hester was facing the next phase of her spiritual development; perhaps some of her thoughts and feelings were presented in the books she now shared the room with. She had run away from this church in anger and rigidity of thought and was now considering returning to the fold. She needed to bare her soul to the pastor and set things right, no matter what might come of it. Her pale skin displayed a few mauve blotches around her neck and lower face. This physiological phenomenon occurred whenever Hester was anxious--it also happened whenever she found a dead body.

Pastor Kathryn tapped lightly on the partially opened door as she moved through it and into her study in a fashion suggesting that she does this on a regular basis. She gently closed the door behind her and gave her guest a broad and welcoming smile. The pastor extended her hand to Hester, who stood up as the women entered, and they shook hands warmly. Twenty-odd years of pastoral work helped this clergy person's soul to assess the situation quickly. The woman sitting in her study with blotches on her neck was going through a spiritual crisis and what she needed most right now was a listening heart, someone who would not judge her harshly. The cleric prayed to Jesus quietly, asking that the Holy Spirit would lead her, and that she would do

what Jesus would do in such a situation. When both women were seated and a few moments of small talk about the children outside had evaporated into silence, Hester cranked up her courage and took charge of the conversation.

“Thank you for seeing me on such short notice, Pastor Kathryn. You may know that I was a member of Salem Lutheran Church for many years, or perhaps you *don’t* know that.”

“Your name sounded familiar to me, Hester, so I took the liberty of looking for it in our church records. Sure enough, I found your name there. I must have seen it during the first years of my pastorate here,” said the minister, “while I was getting the lay of the land, so to speak.”

“The reason I left this church was because I disapproved of the attitude and behavior of your predecessor, Pastor John. He would make changes, both liturgical and procedural, without really consulting the congregation. When he did consult us on any matter, the congregation was often divided over the change. I suppose we just get too lost in trivia at times, pastors and all of the People of God as well. I am so grateful for Jesus and how he puts up with us, and this gratitude is growing day by day at this juncture of my life. It is a miracle of grace, and a witness to the truth of the Church in its various expressions, that it continues to exist at all, given the events of the past two thousand years.” Our humanity, *my* humanity is very flawed--and very beautiful--at the same time. I am learning to be more patient with others and, above all, as Saint Francis de Sales says, more patient with myself.

The pastor nodded her head and gave a knowing smile as a way of encouraging the person before her to continue on. *Don’t interrupt her; she’s on a roll.*

Hester took a deep breath and then let it out slowly, the way she had learned to do in yoga class. “Well, I used my annoyance at these relatively small matters as an excuse for leaving this

church. I blamed absolutely everything on the pastor. Reflecting back on it now, and observing other people in various other churches, I have come to the conclusion that we can easily project our own hang-ups, if you will, onto a clergyperson when we don't want to deal with our own inner restlessness, or real reasons for discontent with our worshipping community.”

Another encouraging nod from the modern day shepherdess, her face intent and accepting. There was no judgment here, only openness to hearing the story of this soul.

“In those days I had been a confused mix of angry independence and, what's the popular term, oh yes, co-dependence. I wanted a pastor and a church that would solve all my problems and let me pray serenely and quietly the way they do in the movies—complete with organ music in the background. Did you ever notice that, Pastor? The organ is playing twenty-four/seven in those TV and movie churches—even when no one is in them! Anyway, I now believe that one cannot find what I was so unreasonably searching for *anywhere*, and that the truest form of prayer is to express what is in our heart and mind to God, sometimes with words and sometimes with gesture, and sometimes by just simply sitting quietly in the presence of God.”

The pastor was about to express her understanding verbally but Hester cut her off by rapidly continuing on. Her confession felt good and she didn't want to break the rhythm of it. *I'm on a roll here; don't interrupt me.*

“I decided, in dishonesty to myself, that I needed much more ‘grounding,’ so I started going to the Traditionalist Catholic Church. It is a group, as you may know Pastor, that lives thinks, and worships in the style of the Roman Catholic Church prior to the Vatican Council II, which evoked so many changes in the Catholic Church. Liturgy in the vernacular would probably be the most obvious change, followed by a wide variety of ministries which opened up



to laypeople. Be that as it may, eventually I was hired by the Traditionalists to serve as secretary. They are good people but, no matter what spiritual path we follow, it has to be followed in freedom and not in fear. I was in that church out of fear and neediness and I understand and admit that now. I was insecure and blamed others so that I would not have to work on my own inner growth. I'll bet that type of blaming happens to a lot of pastors."

Pastor Kathryn responded ever so softly without so much as even hinting at the twinge of pain the accuracy of Hester's insight triggered within her, "You seem to be very much in touch with who you are, and where you are at this time in your life. I just want to sit back and reverence what the Holy Spirit is doing in you right now. Please continue, Hester."

"My prayer and meditation with the Gospel suggests very strongly to me that Jesus came to set us all *free*. The freedom he invites us to is deep inside and it manifests itself in the *Shalom* he so often invites us to in the four Gospel accounts. It's a freedom that is available to all of us and is not dependant upon peaceful outer circumstances or heavenly organ music, though both of those things can be very nice.

"Hiding from the truth of who we are, and our real motivation for our choices, goes against the very call of the Gospel. Many people see the spiritual life as something gloomy and filled with rules, regulations, and things that we're not allowed to do. It really is quite the *opposite*. After one of the priests was murdered at the Traditionalist Catholic Church last summer, I needed to rethink things. It appeared that taking refuge in another church did not keep human frailty or insecurity at bay in the least. Only Jesus can do that for me and I am called to cooperate freely with that process in simplicity and in truth."

"Hester, I am honored at the way in which you are sharing your soul with me. God is

obviously very powerfully at work within you. Are you comfortable continuing on?”

“Very comfortable, thanks to the illumination and courage given me by the Holy Spirit, along with your pastoral skills, Pastor Kathryn.

“I am presently living a form of monastic life ‘in the world.’ I don’t want to enter a monastery or become a Lutheran deaconess. The monks and nuns at the Salesian Monastery here in Brodheads ville have been a source of enormous comfort and support for me. Their spirit is much like yours—I am sure that all of it is a reflection of the Spirit of God. I make little retreats there from time to time and often celebrate the Liturgy of the Hours with them. Much like Jesus would do, they force nothing on me. One of them did tell me to try to ‘shut up’ one time, and just listen when I pray. Another time he suggested that I ‘lighten up.’ He said those things with such gentle strength and humor that it was easy to take his advice to heart, and I have found it to be most helpful. That is just what I’m doing, Pastor. I’m evolving from ‘*Miss not MS*’ Von Kiel, to a much happier ‘Hester.’ What I need to know now is the status of my connection to Salem Lutheran Church. Have I strayed too far, or am I still welcome here if I choose to return to the congregation?”

The pastor couldn’t help herself. Even though *Miss* Von Kiel had lightened up and turned into Hester, she still looked a tad like Barbie’s grandmother. The pillbox hat she wore seemed to be surgically implanted into her hairdo. It appears her sense of fashion stopped somewhere in the Jackie Kennedy era. *Humor is healthy and it helps me to cope. It is a real pastoral tool—and it’s fun too!*

## Chapter 9

Francis walked leisurely through the lush green Asian woods carrying his friend's long black umbrella and met with only two medium sized wild dogs. They looked at him as if to say, with only a hint of a growl, *you leave me alone and I'll leave you alone, but this is really my turf.* The sunlight splashed through the trees and allowed the occasional streams and pools of water along the way glitter and dance with light. Francis' physical body was on the road but his heart was still back at the *Chan* Buddhist Monastery. The time went all too quickly there and so much had happened. He would never be the same.

His master was Jesus, no question about it. These beautiful traditions, however, from all parts of the world, held much truth as well. He often encouraged people to celebrate all that they hold in common with others and to respect those things which are different about one another. Now he was the different one. He found himself wondering why people were staring at him when he walked through the streets of Asia. He even checked his shirt once or twice to make sure that he had not left any evidence there from the wonderful baked goods he bought along the way at the little bakeries which dotted the village streets. The egg custards were the best! Then he realized why he drew so much attention--he was the only Westerner in the area many times. He laughed heartily at the names the Asians had for Westerners: "round eyes" and "big noses."

Francis remembered a story his Jesuit friend Ignatius told him one time. It seems that Ignatius was on an elevator somewhere in Asia, along with a young mother and her little son. The boy spent the brief ride commenting on the big nose and round eyes of the tall English speaking man in the elevator car with them. The mother politely tried to quiet the boy who, of course, spoke one of the Chinese languages. As the mother and son left the elevator, Ignatius wished them a good day in fluent Chinese and told them that he enjoyed the ride with them.

Mother and son slipped away red faced and Ignatius had a good laugh. That's the way to celebrate differences Francis thought—with humor—not fear and prejudice. We fear what we do not understand.

The monk admired the beautiful black Asian hair that people in these parts have. Francis couldn't understand why some of the younger people, and a few older ones, would turn it red or some other color. Everyone's perception of beauty is different, he mused. They see some aspects of Westerners as beautiful and therefore want to imitate it, and we do the same thing regarding Easterners.

The traveler was brought out of his reverie by coming upon a huge clearing where thousands of people were milling around a Buddha the size of the Empire State Building. The beautiful golden statue rested at the top of hundreds of steps and glistened in the mid-afternoon sun. The scene made the round eyed, big nosed Westerner jump for joy and seemed to exaggerate his features even more. His suitcase on wheels bumped along behind him. Due to his fair skin, Francis opened up the umbrella he had used to keep the dogs away and started upward, step by step by step, approaching the enormous image of the Buddha.

Some of the people ascending or descending the steps looked at this strangely adorned person from another land and tried not to laugh. They would put their hands in front of their mouths, trying to maintain the politeness and mannerliness of the Asian people. Francis made his bizarre appearance stand out even more by hollering out to them in a language that most of them did not know. "Oh go ahead and laugh. Don't worry about it. I know I look ridiculous. I just don't want to get sunburned. Have a nice day." The laughter was infectious. *That's the way to celebrate differences.* Beautiful Chinese music floated through the air as he made his slow

and prayerful pilgrimage upward, and Francis felt like he was floating too--suitcase, umbrella, and all.

The Buddha grew larger and his features became clearer as the monk ascended the steps. Prayers of gratitude welled up from deep within him. How had he gotten to this point in his life? The more he followed Christ, the more Christ seemed to reveal himself through other people, other cultures, and in other lands. His study and experience with Eastern religions had drawn him more and more deeply into the mystery of Christ. It also allowed him to immerse himself in a five thousand year old system of medicine and become a Chinese doctor in addition to the clinical psychologist which he had already been. When people would comment on his various interests and multifaceted background, Francis would simply say that, “the only thing I don’t do is wheel alignment.”

He was just about at the top of the more than many steps now. It took about a half hour to make the climb. There was a large circular walk at the top of the steps and around the base of the Buddha, complete with restrooms and trinkets for sale. Whether it’s Lourdes, Fatima, or the big Buddha, people are people, and the religious trinket sales crop up. It’s just nice not to have to deal with the Blessed Mother with a clock in her stomach here. *Oh no, I think I just spotted a Buddha earring—and on a Westerner.*

Now *there’s* a salesman I’d like to do business with, Francis thought, as he walked toward an ice cream vendor sitting in the shade of the stone wall, which encircled the walkway around the base of the Buddha. The hot and tired monk pantomimed, yelled, overemphasized, and pointed to the type of ice cream he wanted to buy. The Chinese man behind the freezer looked at him kindly, smiled patiently, and said in perfect English, “Oh you want a chocolate-

coated vanilla ice cream on a stick.” Francis responded much more quietly in the affirmative and closed the big black umbrella which was over his head, hoping that he might appear a little less ridiculous, but accepted the fact that it was probably too late for that.

Suitcase rolling behind him, bumbershoot closed safely under his arm since no wild dogs were likely to venture up here, and a dripping ice cream on a stick in his hand, Francis made several happy laps around the feet of the Buddha, stopping from time to time to look out over the surrounding forest, trying to catch a glimpse of the monastery he had just lived in. He leaned against the wall looking out over the island and prayed for his community, family, and friends back home. He also prayed for freedom from addiction for the many people in this area who appeared to be addicted to gambling, often horse racing of all things. One of the reasons Francis was given a grant to come to Asia was to teach health care workers about the addictive process from a Western point of view. He did what he could to explain the twelve-step model of recovery to several large groups of people and then stayed on to give a spiritual retreat. Now that his professional work was done, he had some time to do things like this--make a Buddhist retreat and visit this beautiful island.

The umbrella went up and he went down step by step, more quickly and easily than he had ascended. The gentle Asian music continued to lull Francis into a state of quiet repose. The people continued to smile at him or laugh behind their hands now and then as he descended back to earth. Francis really claimed for himself the inner freedom of not caring what anyone thought. It had long been his contention that the freest people of all are those who can get beyond what other people think and be who they are before God.

When he reached the ground, Francis went to the gift shop and, having learned his lesson

from the ice cream vendor, asked in English if they carried a CD of the music that had been playing. He did not pantomime or shout or point. The lady behind the counter didn't even begin to know what he was talking about. Would he ever get this routine right? *Maybe it's some sort of plot!* He launched into his Harpo Marx act and the woman understood her customer perfectly. She did have the music and he was delighted to purchase the CD so that the community could enjoy this music with him back at home. *Wow, I must be learning to speak Chinese!* He ambled over to the bus station nearby. Francis did not want to miss the only afternoon bus because that bus would take him to the dock on the island, and from there he had to make a boat ride across the South China Sea back to Cheung Chau island, and then a walk from the dock up the mountain to Xavier Retreat House where he was staying. If it grew dark, he might never find his way back because there were just too many winding streets and wild dogs—and darkness.

Shifting gears now, back in the hills of Pennsylvania, Mutt clanked away from his home in the old family van. He left the better car there for his wife and daughter to use if they had the need. Within fifteen minutes he was chugging up to the farmhouse, which contained both captive and guard. *Maybe I've overreacted. Who am I to play God with people's futures? Was it too late to get out of the mess that I created for myself and for everyone else?*

Perhaps his hyperness this last day or two, along with his ensuing behavior, was the result of too much of that antidepressant he had recently been given by the family practice doctor. He had heard a clinical psychologist who specializes in psychopharmacology on the evening news recently. He talked about a “serotonin crisis” which can result from too much of certain antidepressants. *Weren't they supposed to be safe?* It seems like every drug on the market was a miracle drug and also very safe when it was *first* being used by people. Before too long it

becomes a problem drug. *Okay, I got my crazy thinking over for the day. I am in good professional hands and I'll leave it at that.* Mutt was calmer now as he walked into the farmhouse and closed the door gently behind him. Jeff, in marked counterpoint, was quite the opposite.

Jeff was extremely restless and needed to get out of the house for a while. He started babbling to Mutt about being cooped up there, and about what they had done, and would they get in trouble. He couldn't seem to control his verbalizations. Mutt thought that if Jeff filled his mouth with food he might just quiet down for a while. Better let him go out and get something to eat. Clearly both kidnapers were having second thoughts about the adventures of the night before and the ramifications thereof. Jeff's behavior triggered something in Mutt and, blood pressure rising, he started to yell at his partner in crime. Soon the two of them were in a shouting match and Jeff eventually left the old house and set off in the van. Mutt was more agitated and confused than ever now.

Brother Matthew lay on his aching back staring up at the cobweb of lines drawn through the cracked ceiling; it looked like the cracks in an old china cup. His body was in pain from the bruising he had taken due to being mistreated, especially from being taken in and out of the van, along with the ride itself. His heart ached to be back at the monastery, the place where he believed that God was calling him to take his simple vows. Though these vows would be renewed yearly for six to nine years, Matthew knew in his heart that he was committing himself to God through the Salesian Monastery forever. Lying there, he thought that he recognized the voice of one of his captors from someplace else in his life during their screaming match. Last night was such a haze that he couldn't come up with any solid clues from that time period either.



The vague recognition of a voice was his only shred of hope at present.

The kidnapped victim began to pray with a mantra. *But hold me safe from the forces of evil. But hold me safe from the forces of evil. But hold me safe from the forces of evil.* Not only was this a spiritual experience, but also wholistically speaking, it would help to take him out of his left-brain hemisphere and move him more into the right brain hemisphere. The right brain was much more creative and flexible than the left, which can get stuck in logic and not see a new way out of things. Once again, Matthew thought, the need for unity and cooperation, not antagonism between that which appears to be different, is made manifest.

Mutt paced back and forth in the outer room. His mood swings were becoming increasingly intense. His highs were higher and his lows were lower. What was wrong with him? What was it that Doc on the TV said? It was something about the need for good psychotherapy, even if one was taking medication, when dealing with many of the emotional disorders. He had been on this antidepressant for six months and initially it seemed to help but it wasn't doing much now. A general practitioner said that he was depressed but the doctor didn't seem to pay much attention to the mood swing part of Mutt's story.

The guy in the next room, who was about to throw his life away in a *monastery* of all places, dumped his little girl. If the place was a cult he might get some support in helping Matthew out of his misguided commitment. Those Catholic places have pretty high standards and accountability to others so no one was likely to help him expose them. That's where Jeff came in handy. He had his own reason for helping with the kidnapping—apart from the excitement and adventure Jeff seemed to think all of this was. Mutt needed to protect his daughter's honor and keep Matthew from doing something stupid. *Buy one; get one free.*

The sunny and quiet afternoon lulled both captor and captive into an agitated slumber. Both dreamt of a good Spirit and an evil spirit doing battle. Darkness and Light struggled mightily to overtake one another. Flashes of light and color, movements so quick they blurred before the eye, sounds in every key and tone. Then, at the height of the ferocious battle...

Slam! Mutt was in one room and Matthew was in the other, but both lifted into the air as the front door banged open with a vengeance. Jeff entered, enveloped in a flurry of commotion, carrying fast food from a McDonald restaurant and offered an aromatic bag of it to Mutt. They were still on the outs as far as Mutt was concerned, so he refused with a shake of his balding head. Jeff proceeded to take a bag into the inner room and gave it to the detainee. He couldn't look Matthew in the eye now; he couldn't even speak to him. The fun was over. He returned to the living room and told Mutt that he had better get himself home. Jeff thought that he might have heard something on the car radio about Mutt's daughter, Christi.

"What did they say? What did they say?" frantically screamed Mutt as he shook the round little man in his catcher's mitt-like hands until both of them almost lost their breakfasts.

"I didn't get the whole story, all I heard is that the disappearance of a young woman is being investigated. I'm not even certain that it is your Christi." Mutt barreled out of the house, letting the door slam behind him. Matthew struggled with the muffled voices he heard through the closed door the way someone would try to tune in an old crystal radio. He knew that name and the voice were in his memory bank somewhere. *Who was it? Who was it?* It was as if there was a wall blocking him from remembering something.

Even though he wanted this ordeal to be over with, Matthew knew deep down in his soul that he was in the center of several converging lives and that if he remained patient, the situation

could resolve itself and the inner conflicts of the people involved might well be healed. Maybe the block to his memory was involuntary and unconscious. The young monk knew the vast power of the unconscious, for good and for healing, from past encounters with his own unconscious processes. Abbot Francis had been around during those days to guide him through the maze of his mind and help to shed some light on the situation. This time he needed to be, with the help of God, strong enough and insightful enough to go it alone. *But hold me safe from the forces of evil. But hold me safe from the forces of evil. But hold me safe from the forces of evil.*

It was now Sunday afternoon and there was still no sign of Brother Matthew. The state police reminded the monastic community that Brother Matthew was a grown man and had been missing for less than twenty-four hours, but they promised to keep an eye out for any strange occurrences that might lead them to their missing brother. Trooper Jonas and his fellow officers would also go over to Beltzville State Park to see if there was any indication of where Matthew might be, since that was where he had planned to spend the previous day. It was to be his monthly hermit day, a day of quiet and inner listening provided for in the Rule of the community.

Hester Von Kiel had returned from a long and cathartic talk with the kindly pastor of Salem Lutheran Church and felt more confident and assured than she had for several years. She had come to terms with the shallow reasons for her deserting her church and had been welcomed back into the fold. Unconscious projection of her own needs and insecurities were powerful and subtle forces indeed. The diaphanous thoughts and feelings that lurk beneath the surface of the mind help us to grow in integrity and wholeness, she now understood, but the need for self-honesty and accountability was vital if the natural process of psychic growing was to occur.

Much to her somewhat confused delight, Hester's process of New Life was moving along at a dizzying pace.

Her pastor was not only comfortable with Hester's spiritual connection to the Salesian Monastery, but encouraged her returning member to continue to spend time with that community. She told Hester: "There is room enough for all in this world. God's table is wide. Do whatever brings you closer to God. What you are doing sounds very honest and healthy, nothing like what you based your earlier decisions on." Hester was generally a more proactive and "take charge" type of person than the monastics she had become friends with. She continued to feel anger over the recent deaths and difficulties associated with and assailing several religious institutions or people in the area. She was also quite concerned and unsettled as to Brother Matthew's fate. He taught her to "loosen up" and she had been a good student. She would find out what was going on one way or another. *Nothing will stop the new Hester! I wonder if "Charlie's Angels" need another angel.*

The woman, presently abounding with newly found freedom and assertiveness, drove over to the Beltzville State Park, a twenty-minute ride. The state police had come and gone. She had been to this park one time with Brother Matthew, during which he pointed out one of his favorite spots. She walked along the edge of the lake in the area she and her monastic friend had strolled along some months prior. Hester let the gentle lapping of the waves, produced by a few powerboats, soothe her. Matthew's favorite "spot" was pretty large. It was *yards and yards* of beach. There was a circle of rocks arranged on the beach which seemed to beckon to her. She saw that someone had had a campfire there not too long ago but it could have been just about any one.

Hester kicked clumps of sand and debris around for about fifteen minutes and found nothing remarkable in the process. The only thing she managed to do was to dirty her new running shoes—bought specifically for sleuthing. She came across a soda can, a dime, a plastic bag, and eventually something blue that peeked out from under a little rocky crevice. It was wet and sandy but she pulled at it with the determination of a fired-up detective and retrieved a book from under the protection of the rock formation. Jessica Fletcher’s only rival let out a gasp. It was a copy of a classic spiritual text from the 1600s entitled *Introduction to the Devout Life* and written by Saint Francis de Sales. This book is a foundational book for the members of the Salesian Monastic Community. Clearly Brother Matthew had been here.

Mutt Simko was looking for information too as he bounded in through the front door to his home. “What’s going on?” he screamed at his red-eyed wife who was surrounded by a ring of crumpled tissues. Trooper Jonas stood up and placed a large hand on Mutt’s uneasy shoulder and used the direct approach. “Mr. Simko, we need you and your wife to come over to the hospital and take a look at someone’s body which was recently found.”

“I don’t have time to do that, Officer, I’m looking for my daughter.”

“I understand that, sir, and hope to God you don’t find her where I need to take you. Right now, if you will.”

Later, tension crackled in the air as the trio walked down the long corridor in the basement of Pocono Medical Center to the hospital morgue. The attendant let them in after Trooper Jonas signed the necessary paperwork. A large refrigerator door was opened and the morgue attendant wheeled out a gurney on which was a body shrouded in a white sheet. The chill from the refrigerator exponentially increased the chill in the couple that was asked to view

the body. The trooper nodded and the attendant, responding to his cue, pulled the sheet down to the shoulders on the body of a young woman. Helena Simko keened from her soul as Mutt Simko doubled over, held his stomach, vomited.

The attendant gently offered a towel to Mutt and stood closely behind the pair in case either one of them would collapse. The trooper had to do his job. “Is that your daughter Christi?”

They both mumbled a garbled affirmative answer but Mrs. Simko’s head shook slowly back and forth, non-verbally saying no, it can’t be her.

## Chapter 10

*Wonder how things are at home. Even in a monastery things break and problems need to be solved. People have such a stereotype of our life. We find God in the ordinary, not by being shielded from everyday issues. Some who want to enter this life are running away, not running toward.* Francis was having the time of his life. The experiences he was having would accompany him throughout the rest of his life both personally and in his ministry. Never did he think he would be in Asia, much less have all of the adventures he was having. The inner and outer world seemed to open up after his fiftieth birthday.

His international travels all started when Aunt Tish took him and one of his sisters to Italy. It was his sister the nun went on that trip. His other sister, the mom and grandmom, was with them both in spirit, as was his strong but gentle brother-in-law; the monk and nun siblings had spent dozens of holidays at their warm and welcoming home. His three brothers were also a big part of his life, as were his two sisters-in-law, who have always been as close as sisters to

him. Nieces and nephews, then marriages, and then grand nieces and nephews. He was truly blessed. Then there was this trip to Asia, the product of a financial grant he didn't even personally apply for. God bless his friend Father Ignatius Lynn, SJ for doing that.

Another blessing for Francis was his clinical and pastoral compassion for young married couples. Their ability to raise children, let alone even have children, was not well supported in contemporary society. The loss of a child is one of the most profound losses in life; some of his patients taught him that very well. He was sure that his love of family came from being born into his own.

The boat Francis was now on must have held a thousand people easily. In the States large boats are "ships," but here the English word used was simply "boat." It was three stories high and propelled through the waves by an enormous paddle wheel at the back end. On his trips from island to island, Francis loved to go to the lower level where some of the travelers could often be seen playing cards, with Chinese paper money scattered all around. The color and size of the money made it look more like they were playing Monopoly than cards. Ironically, the action took place under a sign that read in English as well as Chinese "No gambling." Huge pushcarts full of all types of vegetables were lined up on the lower level near the exits. They would be sold on the streets of whatever island the boat was destined for. Being a good vegetarian, Francis eyed the pushcarts and began to feel hungry. He tried to order a cheese sandwich at the snack bar. The Westerner wound up with a cup of tea. Something in the back of his mind reminded Francis that the Chinese word for tea and the English word for cheese sounded a little bit alike. He wouldn't forget that. If he did, he might never be able to eat again while he was traveling.

*How quickly we change.* When he arrived in Asia a few weeks ago Francis would see people sprawl out lengthwise on three or four molded plastic chairs on the boats and take a nap. He thought it a little ill mannered. Now here he was sprawled out and not giving it a second thought. *Judge not and you shall not be judged!* The hour ride across the South China Sea was very refreshing. It gave the pilgrim time to process a little of the many events that had occurred in his life recently. Images of the big Buddha danced through his mind over and over again. The music that accompanied his trek up and down the mountain of steps echoed in his heart and soul. His gratitude for a personal relationship with God through Christ abounded. How he loved and respected the Eastern teachings, but how he thanked God that he knew Jesus as God and human. Maybe he didn't have the depth to find God in other ways, so a merciful God came to him in the form of Christ.

Christians are a minority in Asia, and Francis observed that when they meet other Christians will often tell one another the date of their baptism and beam with pride. We Westerners could take a lesson from them I suppose. Remembering birthdays can be a good thing, but celebrating all of life, each and every day, can be even better. That is not always an easy thing to do given the challenges and injustices life can present us with, but it is so much better than the alternative.

The folks here often walk right up to you and ask you your age. That is so different from us Westerners. They almost always, in addition, talk about the amount of qi, or life force, that radiates from me. I think it has something to do with the pinkish glow of my fair O'Neill skin. Whatever the case, it is so enjoyable to watch. I can predict the question and comment every time I am in a crowd here. Maybe it was worth all that sun poison my half Irish skin endured as a



child.

The blast of the ship's horn blasted me out of my sleep and upright. My body now had three ridges from the molded plastic chairs, which had served as my bed for the last hour. I tried to look like a native as I stood up and stretched but my "Jack in the Box" act when the horn blew probably gave me away—not to mention my round eyes and big nose. We all gathered our parcels and jackets and lined up near the exits from the ship, very near the carts of vegetables. A few buoyant bumps later we were filing out of the large boat onto the dock of Cheung Chau.

There were the golden arches of the ubiquitous McDonald fast-food restaurant gleaming on the dock. I understand that in each location the McDonald chain creates a sandwich that reflects the locale. Since I did not want a "Sumoburger" I thought I would try for some French fries, which I did get. *Ah, the perfect complement to the tea I received when I was trying to get a cheese sandwich. I'm getting better at this.*

My friend Ignatius had hand drawn me a little map to help me find my way from the dock up the mountainside and back to the retreat house at the top of the mountain where he lived. It had grown dark and there were no streetlights. I walked along the dock in the sporadic light of the shops. Navigating through light and darkness with peace of heart is our spiritual quest, as I see things. One area where there were no shops and which was quite spacious was in front of the undertaker's parlor, which is what we would call such an establishment in the West. The locals give wide birth to spirits, real or potential. It was in places such as this where the local community would have their funeral services, and then carry the bodies in procession through the island town to the graveyard. They had to carry them—there were no motorized vehicles on this island of Cheung Chau, except for a few putt-putt type motorbikes.

My father was a bus driver and none of his children inherited his excellent sense of direction. I guess it skipped a generation. I made a few turns into a darkening maze of houses, little shrines with incense sticks burning at the doorsteps, and a few growls from half-asleep dogs. The maze made me think of all the rats, mice, monkeys, and pigeons I worked with and did surgery on in experimental psychology lab during my training. I also remember a human brain in a jar of formaldehyde in the lab. I was more taken by all of the life events and feelings that that brain must have experienced than the neuroanatomy and physiology which was the point of that educational experience.

Now I know how all those animals must have felt when I maze-trained them to find the reinforcer, usually food, at the end of the maze! Before very long I was completely lost—the story of my life. There I stood with a little flashlight on the brink of burning out—part of my story also, my trusty umbrella and my suitcase, looking at the scrap of paper on which the map was so neatly drawn with a black pen. I really was less than ten minutes away and was not particularly concerned, but still didn't relish the idea of sleeping on a bench somewhere until morning.

Clinical psychologists know from scientific research that about eighty per cent of communication is non-verbal. A perfect example of this occurred while I was making believe that I could see and understand the little map in my hands. A Chinese woman who spoke no English came up to me, a Westerner who spoke only medical Chinese, and pulled the map out of my hand. I was a little startled but I presumed that she was trying to help. Fortunately for me, she was trying to help. My Asian angel didn't seem to understand the map at first and was turning the paper from front to back, side to side, top to bottom. *Was she imitating me?* I

oriented the paper for her and traced the route drawn for me with my finger, and when I got to the top of the route saw that my friend had placed a cross there as a symbol for the retreat house. I circled the cross with my index finger and pointed up the mountain into the void of darkness. I could see an enormous light bulb aura begin to glow over her head as this Traveler's Aid type person grabbed my arm, without asking I might add, and dragged me down an alley. It was like we were on roller blades and my wheels were stuck. This was yet another opportunity for me to think as I had just a few days prior: *Well, she'll either kill me or it will be fun.*

We twisted and turned through right angle after right angle like two pieces on a Monopoly board, no fake money with us this time. We climbed up a few steps, turned at a cement landing, and then climbed a few more steps; finally we passed the silhouette of a little school building and playground on our way. The large light bulb of understanding lit above *my* head this time and I knew exactly where we were and that I could proceed straight ahead and that the gates to the retreat house would be directly in front of me. I bowed to the lady out of respect and to let her know that I knew where I was. She bowed back and vanished into the darkness.

I walked up the mountainside for another minute or so, feeling the fatigue of my travels and hoping that the gates would not be locked, and the next thing I knew, there I was in front of the open and welcoming gates to the Xavier Retreat Center. I went to my room and unpacked a few things and washed my face. It was about the time when Ignatius would have an hour of meditation before the Blessed Sacrament. Next I walked over to the simple Asian chapel, feeling strangely rejuvenated.

I fell in love with that chapel at first sight and was happy to spend some time there. I took off my shoes, walked into the big square room with an enormous glass window looking out

into the South China Sea, placed a little wooden prayer bench over my ankles and sat back on it, low to the floor. There were about a dozen votive candles flickering in glass holders of every shade of the rainbow. My friend loves color; I'm more of a clear glass person myself. The shimmering rainbow did look inviting and soothing just the same, yet very alive. I made a resolution to become more *colorful* in my choices and see how it would go. *Friends and family do stretch us and help us to grow, if we just let them.*

The room was filled with about thirty Asian faces. These were a group of young people here on retreat. How I admired the fact that they were taking time from busy work schedules to spend it on inner reflection and prayer. Father Ignatius came out in a white alb, a robe that went down just below his knees, even though it was supposed to be floor length. It seemed like he was growing taller every day even though he was in his mid-forties. He placed a very simple monstrance, a small crystal container holding the Eucharist or sacred bread, venerated as the Body and Blood of Christ, on the coffee table high altar. Moonlight sprinkled the shimmering waves of the sea and cast a calming spell over the gathering. Gentle breezes entered through the windows inviting the curtains to do a little dance. We lit incense sticks and the community sang in Chinese. I lip-synched in the rainbow-filled darkness.

We rested in prayerful silence for about an hour. An Asian tradition of spirituality, along with my own Salesian spirituality and my friend's Ignatian spirituality, talks about the sanctity of the present moment. We went there--lost ourselves in it. Even the very hyper collie *A Lek*, a name that translates in to something like "dear very skilled one," slept in prayerful silence for the entire hour. When *A Lek* first climbed the chapel stairs to settle in on the landing just outside the open door (without so much as a bow or genuflection I might add) my thoughts drifted to his

name for a few moments.

The only thing that dog was skilled at was running and escaping the Superior of the community when it was time for him to go into his cage, usually because a new group of retreatants was arriving. Ignatius, in contrast, would call him and *A Lek* would respond promptly, going into his cage docilely if that is what was being asked of him. When the Superior of the community wanted *A Lek*, it was an entirely different matter. The large framed gentleman with bald pate and silver “tonsure” was the soul of charity and his call to the dog was more like “asking” than “commanding.” I would sometimes be in my room, hear the Superior call the collie, and then see the dog run by my window, followed a moment later by the puffing Superior. It was a little like watching a “Punch and Judy” puppet show, or the Muppets on TV. This show would go on for about twenty minutes. Sometimes he would so fatigue the older Jesuit that the dog got his way and stayed out of the cage until Father Ignatius returned and took charge. Approximately every three or four times, however, the Superior would win and *A Lek* would eventually go into his cage after about twenty passes by my window. After this cognitive tangent I returned to prayer, smiling at the simple gifts of life.

A few minutes before our prayer time ended, Ignatius took an incense stick and reverently circled the Eucharistic Presence in front of us on the low altar. The community began to sing the English hymn that our monastery back in Pennsylvania sings every night during the Office of Night Prayer, a service which is more traditionally called “Compline.” Ignatius loved that hymn which he learned when he came to spend time with us at the monastery. Ignatius took a copy of it with him once when he stayed at our monastery and later taught it to his friends here on the other side of the world. It was deeply moving to hear the reverent voices singing in

English.

“Now in the fading light of day,  
Maker of all to you we pray,  
That with your everlasting love,  
You guard and keep us from above.

“Help and defend us through the night,  
Danger and terror put to flight,  
Never let evil have its way,  
Preserve us for another day.

“Creator Almighty this be done,  
Through Jesus Christ, our Lord, your Son,  
Who in the Spirit we adore,  
Who reigns with you forevermore. Amen”

*I wonder how things are back at home. Hope the folks there are as peaceful as I am.*

## Chapter 11

A car appearing old enough to be driven by one of the first swamis ever initiated in the sacred land of India, and as large as a battleship, rolled up the monastery driveway and parked

under the skeletal trees of early winter. A kindly benefactor—perhaps one who was trying to save on gas--had donated the vehicle to the *Arsha Vidya Gurukulam* in Saylorsburg, PA. The people in the area simply call the *Gurukulam*, which means the family of the guru in Sanskrit, “the ashram.” Ashram is a term for a Hindu monastery where lay devotees and swamis, Hindu monastics, gather in spiritual community, some living there and some living in their own homes.

The ashram is a wonderful and prayerful spot where people join together, many from India originally, gather to pray, to learn something of the Hindu scriptures, and to enjoy a sense of community. The ashram and the Salesian Monastery enjoyed a wonderful and deepening relationship. One of the swamis often visited and prayed with the community. Abbot Francis often visited the ashram, and even gave a talk about Jesus one Christmas eve to a temple full of receptive Hindu brothers and sisters.

A short man with orange robes, or *kavi* as the monastic robes are called, and just a whisper of a belly got out of the enormous car. Had he not been a vegetarian, the whisper might have been more of a shout! The visitor had a square piece of soft cream-colored woolen cloth folded into a triangular shape and wrapped around his shoulders and upper body. The swami made his way to the front door of the main building. The monastic community and friends had long ago realized that monasticism is one single cross-cultural call or archetypal experience, which has been shared by men and women for as long as humanity has existed.

The Christian expression of monasticism was much younger than the Hindu expression, only about two thousand years old and deeply rooted in Christ, but there was a real brotherhood / sisterhood among monastics of all traditions. One woman who came to the monastery to visit referred to this swami, as “Brother Swami.” In the sacred Sanskrit language he would be known

as a *Sannyasi*, or renunciate. He rang the bell that hung by the door—a real doorbell, not an electronic one. Sister Jane de Chantal answered and welcomed him warmly, just as anyone would welcome a brother.

“Hello Sister; thank you for answering the door. It is not my intention to pry into the business of the monastery, but I have a feeling there’s some turbulence happening in the community,” he said in his usual simple and straightforward manner.

The nun simply nodded with a half-smile reflecting her lack of surprise at this message from the realm of the Spirit that was delivered in such an unassuming tone.

“I also have an inner sense as to what might be going on, so perhaps I might be of some help to the Sisters and Brothers. May I join you for meditation and Evening Prayer, Vespers, and then chat with the community after dinner?”

The Sister’s face brightened as she joined her hands palm to palm in front of her heart and bowed to the Light in her guest. The Hindu monastic made his way over to the oratory for some private meditation before Evening Prayer was to be celebrated. Before long, the other members of the community gathered, minus Brother Matthew and, of course, Abbot Francis.

The oratory was made of plain wood, varnished and simple on the inside, white and simple on the outside. Some Amish people made the barn-like structure, complete with hip roof, and it was then trucked from the Lancaster, Pennsylvania area to Brodheadsville. Two men who served as carpenter and electrician for the building of the new, and strikingly beautiful, local Presbyterian church did the electrical wiring and inner insulation and paneling for the monastic oratory. Life in the area was ecumenical indeed, with each person staying rooted deeply in his or her own tradition. Exposure to other traditions, and respect for what is different, seemed to be



the key factor in such good spiritual relationships. Four choir stalls, the podiums behind which each monastic celebrated the Liturgy of the Hours, lined both sides of the room and faced the front where a small table-like altar and ambo, the liturgical lectern from which the Word of God is proclaimed, stood. The open book of the scriptures, on a pedestal on the back wall to the left of the altar manifested God's presence, and a tabernacle in the form of a simple wooden box containing the Body and Blood of Christ under the appearance of bread, manifested God's presence on the right pedestal.

After a period of quiet and the chanting of Psalms, listening to a reading from Scripture, intercessions for the needs of all God's people, the common prayer was ended with a final oration and a blessing by the Prioress in the absence of the abbot. The celebrants slowly drifted over to the main house one by one in silence where a simple vegetarian meal was served. During the meal they listened to a talk by the long deceased but still quite famous Trappist monk, Thomas Merton. He was speaking to the novices of his community about the vow of stability. The vow of stability is often thought to mean that a monastic must live and die in one place, that is, the monastery where he or she first made vows. While this is typically the case, the *deeper* meaning is that the monk or nun vows to persevere in his or her vocation unto death. Such a vow is certainly a tall order in times like today when any permanent commitment is threatened by extinction on every side.

Monastic tradition holds that people need to do whatever their consciences, their concepts of God, and their value systems call them to in order to survive, and hopefully even to flourish. Thus, the community would try not to judge anyone harshly for his or her choices, especially if they turn out far differently from the original hopes and dreams the people involved initially had.

The monastics presume in favor of the initial commitment and pray and work toward supporting it, but sometimes a marriage or monastic vocation does not survive. We move on in faith.

The members of the community viewed such events as more a reflection of the turmoil in the world, a turmoil that makes relationships so fragile at times. In spite of that, they still lived by the philosophy that each person is responsible for his or her own behavior.

After dinner the community members forgot their problems and chatted happily for a little while about the audiotape they had heard and the food they had eaten. Then housekeeping types of items for the smooth flow of community life were discussed. Everybody did the dishes; the swami knew just where to put the things he dried, having been through the routine many times before. After that, the community gathered for “Chapter”—the name given to a monastic community meeting. Swami was often invited because he enjoyed discussing spiritual topics with the community, and because the community was enriched by his presence as well. Tonight, however, something else was going on. Brother Matthew was missing and a young woman’s body was found on the back five acres, and their Hindu monastic brother had offered to help them.

Garbed in her gray tunic, blue scapular, and small blue veil, Sister Jane de Chantal began the business of the meeting in the midst of the others who were similarly habited, with one in the orange color of flame, by recapping recent events thus far:

“It is now 6 p.m. on Sunday evening. Brother Matthew (her voice quavered ever so slightly at this point) has not been seen since yesterday morning. The State Police seemed to take the disappearance rather lightly at first but are now quite concerned, as I know we all are. Hester Von Kiel, now in her ‘lite mode’ so to speak, has returned to her home after her visit here. We

are good at welcoming others into our home; it is one of the many strong points of our community. Thank you for living out the teaching of Saint Benedict who asks us to welcome all guests as Christ in our midst. Hester and our many other guests often say how welcome they feel here. Forgive my digression, but I wanted to accent the positive. It is so easy to comment on the negative and miss opportunities to build one another up.

Anyway, our friend Hester, and perhaps even more so, Brother Matthew's friend Hester, found a very important piece of evidence today during her private snooping. Brother Matthew's well-worn copy of the *Introduction to the Devout Life* was discovered by her near a campfire site over at Beltzville Lake. Hester, gifted with a beautiful imagination and more than enough words to express it, compared pulling the book out from under a rock by the campsite to the water from the rock that sated the thirst of our Jewish mothers and fathers in the desert, and also as New Life rising from the tomb of Christ.

At any rate, we now know for certain that our Brother Matthew was there--and probably into the dark of evening--because it looks as if a fire had recently been lit in that fire pit. The police are investigating, Brother Matthew's parents have been informed, and I have not yet called Abbot Francis, who as you know is on retreat, to tell him about recent events. I thought we might wait another day or so because I don't want to disturb his retreat unless I have to. This is really a tough decision to make but there isn't much he could do at this time anyway." The nun seemed relieved to have finished her address to the little gathering, her confidence and volume seeming to wane as she neared the end of her words.

The energy in the room suggested that the others in the group might have some mixed feelings about her choice not to call their abbot, but they went along with the nun's decision for

the moment. The community was very open to discussion and tried to arrive at everything through consensus, and if anyone felt a real need to object, he or she would certainly have said it. Abbot Francis often quoted Saint Paul who urged the early Christians to: “Tell the truth in love.” No one was truly certain on just how to proceed anyway. “Conflicted” is what Abbot Francis would have diagnosed the community situation as.

“The young woman who was found on our property, buried in the shallow muddy grave we all witnessed early this morning, was none other, my dear ones, than Christi Simko.”

“Who is Christi Simko?” Brother Benedict humphed, still struggling with the earlier decision not to call the abbot yet.

“Do you remember when Brother Matthew first came to us, Brother?” asked the nun. She was getting some of her confidence back, but it seemed to waver in and out like a station on an old radio. “Our novice had been engaged, and left the apparently lovely girl he was betrothed to because he felt so strongly that God was calling him here to our monastery.”

“Yes I do, Sister. It seems like such a long time ago. Brother Matthew has grown so much, inwardly, spiritually, and in community since then. I remember well the screams from his nightmares waking me up from time to time,” responded the monk, gentling his tone as the words came out.

“Well everyone, Christi Simko is the very woman Brother Matthew was engaged to marry!”

The mood of the group turned tentative and cautious. Everyone was lost in his or her own thoughts. Finally the swami spoke up. “I have a few thoughts about these events which I would like to offer,” he said with respect, humility, and firmness. “As you know, sometimes I’m

rather intuitive, but I always ask people to check out the information I offer them before acting on anything I may say. You know—if someone is taking medication, to continue with it until they visit their Eastern or Western doctor again, or to do whatever is prudent and appropriate in order for them to confirm my intuitive information, or to dismiss my thoughts as they see fit. You folks might call some of that process “praying for confirmation.”

The others had been down this fascinating road with the swami several times before, and also with Abbot Francis, so they simply nodded in indication of their understanding.

“Well, my inner sense tells me that Brother Matthew is alive and well--and not far from here either. It *appears* to others who are detaining him that he is being held against his will but really isn't. Forgive me please; I don't even know what that means. I certainly do not expect you to grasp it either.

Concerning the death of the young woman, my inner sense tells me that it was not a premeditated murder or done out of anger. I don't understand that either. These thoughts were somewhat vague when I drove over here earlier this evening. What was clear to me is that the community is going through a difficult time. My time of meditation in the oratory before Evening Prayer brought great clarity to my thoughts. Being in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament, as you wonderful folks call the consecrated bread in the oratory tabernacle, and immersed in the spiritual energy of this place, was very helpful in gaining clarity.”

Sister Scholastica was still “the new nun on the block” and her personality was also mildly introverted, so she thought a great deal and spoke infrequently, but when she did her words went right to the heart of the matter. Abbot Francis often says that introverts *think* to talk and extroverts *talk* to think. “We need Detective Gold and Dr. Fleur here as soon as possible.”

The others looked at her cautiously, knowing that she was right. They were not conflicted at all on that matter!

The prioress, Sister Jane de Chantal, responded to Sister Scholastica's crisp statement for the rest of the group: "Detective Gold's ex-wife is on the brink of death and he is in New York dealing with many personal and material matters at this time. As you may know, he never wanted to divorce his ex-wife but she divorced him because of her illness. I'm sure that there was more to it than that, especially never having heard Mrs. Gold's side of the story. That is as much as I know of that part of the story, Sister.

"Dr. Chantal Fleur, graduate school classmate and internship partner of Abbot Francis has been trying to be supportive to Detective Gold during this trying time. Detective Gold and Dr. Fleur appear to have strong feelings for one another but are struggling to deal with the issues that life has handed to each of them individually with as much balance as possible. She sometimes takes the bus over to Chinatown, New York and meets him for dinner or a show to take his mind off things for a while. I don't see how we could ask either of them to help our community during this time of need in the lives of each one of us."

Sister Scholastica was puzzling out the two different specialties of Dr. Fleur and Abbot Francis. Both were clinical psychologists, licensed by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Dr. Fleur, however, was primarily a forensic psychologist, while Abbot Francis was a behavioral medicine specialist, along with being a Chinese medicine doctor. Then the new kid in her forties remembered. The two classmates and friends had parted ways for some time during residencies in their respective sub-specialties.

After avoiding the real issue at hand, namely that it would be almost impossible and

perhaps even grossly uncharitable to seek out the services of the pair that had been so helpful in previous trying circumstances, Sister Scholastic sighed and slumped a fraction, depicting the mood of the entire group who felt like “sheep without a shepherd.”

“Dearest fellow monastics, may I conclude our gathering this evening by reciting an ancient Hindu Peace Invocation?” queried the swami. The response was a resounding “Yes, please do.”

First chanted in Sanskrit, then translated into English, the swami prayed for and with the group of fellow monastics:

“May people be happy. May all who govern righteously rule the earth. Let there be welfare for animals and people of wisdom at all times. May all people be happy.

“May it rain at the proper time. May the earth produce grain. May this country be free from famine. May people of contemplation be fearless.

“May all be happy. May all be healthy. May all enjoy prosperity. May none suffer.

“Lead me, by giving me the knowledge, from the unreal or what appears to be real to the truly real; from the darkness of ignorance to the light of knowledge; and from death to the immortality of limitlessness liberation.

“*Om* peace, peace, peace.”

All departed to the oratory for the celebration of Night Prayer, the liturgical completion of the day, after which the Grand Silence would begin again until after breakfast.

## Chapter 12

The black vinyl sign, which was glass-encased and displaying white changeable letters outside of Transfiguration Roman Catholic Church, announced its information in Cantonese, Mandarin, and English. Inside, in a niche ensconced in the right hand wall, the head of a full size statue of St. Rocco was incongruously illuminated with an electric light bulb halo. The Mass of the Resurrection was celebrated in English, and most people in the congregation were of Italian background. The presider at the liturgy was also of Italian descent but had spent many years in Asia as a missionary and now pastored this Chinatown New York City church, dealing with some of the same situations he dealt with in mainland China. Added to the numerous pastoral concerns he had for his flock were issues associated with estrangement from family members who were still living in China, the financial stress of having made the journey here, their struggles to pay back transportation loans, difficulty getting jobs—especially jobs paying a just wage, language problems, and on and on.

The slim, dark complected pastor with silver-gray thinning hair sprinkled the casket with practiced motions; the coffin itself was draped in a snowy white funeral pall. He then incensed the remains of the departed, swinging the smoking thurible in low aromatic circles as he walked around the casket. “Let us make our way now to the cemetery for the burial of our sister in the faith, Annetta. The funeral directors will help to organize the procession when we get outside.” The organ droned as the mourning community got up, genuflected on the right knee, and slowly walked toward the back door of the church. The soloist sang in English an ancient liturgical hymn inviting the angels to lead Annetta into paradise and the church all but emptied, the



departed being wheeled out behind the ragged procession of family and friends, followed by two teen-aged altar servers, one girl and one boy, and finally by the priest.

Dr. Chantal Fleur thought about how ethnically different all of this was from her own French-Canadian roots. She had often teased her mother and father for pronouncing the word “out” like the word “oat.” When her family would say the word “aye” in questioning if something was understood or not, Chantal’s mind often conjured up a gaggle of pirates making people walk the plank or shooting cannon balls toward another ship out on the ocean. Her family had emotion to spare, but not of this variety, that erupted like a sputtering teakettle every time someone took a deep breath. What was it her Italian friend from South Philly said one time? It was something about the more weeping and wailing done, the more honor was given to the deceased. In fact, she now remembered, his aunt was a professional mourner. Aunt Tina’s services were engaged right along with the organist and funeral director to mourn at funeral services. Each culture has its own beauty, as well as things a bit difficult to fathom. Graduate school had given her such interesting and wonderful life-long friends.

The funeral Mass itself was also very different from her early recollections. She was still in grammar school then but remembered what was called the “Requiem Mass.” The service was named after the Latin word for rest. Everyone and everything was draped in black, including the casket, priest, and the people. The Latin prayers provided an aura of mystery and, to Chantal’s mind, even more of a barrier between the living and the recently departed.

Her professional empathy today gave way to sympathy from time to time for everyone involved, especially for David. While *sympathy*, feeling the very emotions of another was acceptable here, it was not acceptable in her clinical practice, especially in the forensic aspect of her work.

There *empathy*, tuning in to the emotions of another and having that person understand that the doctor was indeed well aware of what was being experienced, was much more helpful. The many empirical studies on the outcome of professional psychotherapy and psychological assessment, rooted in hard data, made it abundantly clear. Empathy, not sympathy, was indeed one of the most healing factors in the doctor-patient relationship.

Be that as it may, Chantal had just celebrated a Mass of the Resurrection, replete with “Alleluias” and white vestments. There was none of that in the old days—especially not any female altar servers. Women were not even allowed beyond the altar railing, which used to separate altar and tabernacle from the body of the church, where the worshipping faithful prayed in their pews. She had entered into all of this today with her entire heart, conflicted as her theology and feelings were. Not too bad for a hopeful agnostic!

There were lots of emotions to process. Detective David Gold, who had relocated from New York City to northeastern Pennsylvania after the divorce, was here to reverence the passing of his ex-wife. He had never wanted a divorce--but Annetta did. Her main reason was because she had become ill and increasingly confused and dependent upon others. She had spent the last years of her life in a nursing home. Dave also knew that his overwork and lack of sensitivity to her needs had not allowed them to bond properly, but she was much too good a person to bring that up much. He had always been for grateful for her but he took her goodness for granted. *Now the God of compassion can make everything right--as right as anything can be in this basically unjust world.*

He quietly whispered the mourner’s Kaddish,<sup>3</sup> a mysterious prayer said to have been brought down from heaven by the angels, and a vehicle for bonding heaven to earth through a confidence that no human person can ever disappear or be annihilated when remembered by the God of Israel.

Gently rocking his upper body to and fro, David uttered the guttural Hebrew sounds expressing this sacred prayer:

“Let the glory of God be extolled, let His great name be hallowed, in the world whose creation He willed. May His kingdom soon prevail, in our own day, our own lives, and the life of all Israel, and let us say: Amen.

“Let His great name be blessed for ever and ever.

“Let the name of the Holy One, blessed is He, be glorified, exalted, and honored, though He is beyond all the praises, songs, and adorations that we can utter, and let us say: Amen.

“For us and for all Israel, may the blessing of peace and the promise of life come true, and let us say: Amen.

“May He who causes peace to reign in the high heavens, let peace descend on us, on all Israel, and let all the world, and let us say: Amen.”

The solemn trip to the cemetery felt like it threw the detective’s emotions into a food processor. Ragged bits of anger, confusion, self-doubt, relief, and peace swirled around and around within him. This was all too new to David and it made him feel very vulnerable and confused. Much of the emotional upheaval had been triggered by his relationship with Chantal, he reasoned. Their relationship had started off in a very stormy fashion but was now, for the most part, peaceful and easy. Given that, both were still holding back somewhat because of their spiritual differences and because of the history of love and pain woven into both of their lives. Some of that history came from personal experiences, the remainder came from what they dealt

with day in and day out in their professional lives. Dave had to admit that even the turbulence in their exchanges had eventually become enjoyable and a source of insight about himself and life. Chantal once told him that the word “emotion” comes from a root word meaning “to push” or “to move.” Dave was still a novice in the school of relationships but was learning—mostly by being pushed and moved by his emotions and by his growing friendship with this new lady in his life. Chantal picked up a few things along the way as well because of her relationship with him. He often light-heartedly consoled himself with that thought.

The burial day itself seemed rather anticlimactic after the years of marriage, the illness, the funeral liturgy itself, and then the brief interment ceremony at the cemetery. Everyone was invited to a lower eastside restaurant after the burial but David felt out of place and torn between two worlds. He was at the burial of his ex-wife, accompanied by the woman that many could perceive as a current girlfriend. Chantal was beginning to be able to read his mind: “Would you like to skip the luncheon and just take a leisurely walk through Chinatown—well, as leisurely as anyone can walk in Chinatown?”

David’s sagging spirit was buoyed up by Chantal’s energetic words and attitude. “What a great idea, Chantal, thanks so much for suggesting it. I would be delighted to walk on the wild side. Now if only I can find some enjoyable company to walk along with me.” She punched him in the arm—a little harder than he had expected, and his one foot slipped over the curb and into a gutter. “It’s a good thing you’re a woman, woman, or else.... Scratch that. It’s a good thing you’re a person, person. How’s that?”

Chantal just rolled her expressive eyes upward. “A cemetery is no place to have an argument. It makes me feel like I need to hold back. Besides, we are beginning to the attract

attention of several groups of mourners. Let's get out of here."

"You're changing too you know," Dave shot back.

"What are you talking about?" his cemetery companion asked.

"Nothing that you can grasp yet. Let's get out of here."

They drove back to the area close to Transfiguration Church, where the Mass of the Resurrection had been celebrated for Annetta, and parked in a lot. Payment for parking was a little pricey but it was well worth every penny. David and Chantal meandered the mostly narrow streets of Chinatown, sometimes on the sidewalks and sometimes in the street, depending on whether the foot traffic or the car traffic was more of a challenge. Some streets were indeed enormous but most were tiny and glutted with people, traffic, barrels of vegetables, and fish flopping in tubs of water on the pavements.

Chantal chattered on in hopes of continuing the lifting of David's spirit, which began as they bantered at the cemetery. "Don't walk too quickly or we'll wind up in 'Little Italy' and then we will have to have pasta for lunch instead of chicken feet. Just kidding—nothing could get me to eat chicken feet! It's fascinating to think about how these neighborhoods have changed over the years. Transfiguration Church was once replete with Italian Catholics and now it's totally Chinese, except for the funerals of former members of the parish. I hope St. Rocco speaks Mandarin or Cantonese, otherwise he might as well go to the old Latin Mass. Annetta was given a real send off—they had Rocco's halo lit up for the occasion."

David smiled pensively.

They passed one of the scores of Chinese medicinal herb shops, and Chantal asked her friend to go in with her. "Everybody's talking about herbs these days, Chantal. We can see that

stuff in a drug store any time we want.”

“Those are primarily *Western* herbs you see displayed and advertised, Dave. This is entirely different, and is based on five thousand years of medical application in China and now, to some degree, even in the West. There are numerous Chinese researchers and pharmacists working at coming to some understanding as to why some of these herbs work as well as they do. Francis has studied with them in Chinese hospitals on several occasions. Chinese medicine doctors almost never give one herb for a condition; they work with groups of them, called ‘formulas.’ The properties of the herbs create a synergistic effect aimed at the *root* cause of the patients symptoms, which are often looked upon as the ‘branches’.”

Chantal won, and they entered the shop where they were immediately aware of the aroma in the spotless building. It smelled like a blend of many scents, not flowery or sweet, maybe a little like a hayfield during pollen season. Large round glass jars filled with raw herbs of various shapes, sizes, and colors were lined up on a long counter and there were several places where old-fashioned looking scales were being used by people in white coats who were taking handfuls of the herbs from the jars and placing them on the scale. These white-coated people, Chantal and Dave later learned, were filling raw herb prescriptions from Chinese medicine doctors for patients. Patent herbal formulas, already prepared in factories and then shipped out to pharmacies, lined the shelves of the long room. Boxes and bottles of every sort, containing pills, potions, powders, salves, and plasters imbedded with medicine, were everywhere. They strolled the room for a while when out of the blue Chantal pointed to a red and white box with gold lettering on it. “I recognize that medicine, Dave.”

She picked up the box and read aloud: “Circular Active Formula.” Then Chantal

attempted to pronounce the Chinese version of the name of the herbal formula: “*Leiyunshang Huoluodan*, something like that. I had a patient, this goes back a few years now, who came to me for a psychological assessment. Many people still call assessment ‘psych *testing*’ but that implies passing or failing so we try to avoid the word ‘testing.’ Assessment is more like taking a snapshot of a person, including *strengths* along with areas where psychological growth might be helpful.

“Back to my story. This woman was in line for a high-powered job of some sort and her company wanted the assessment; so did she. The patient had a marked physical weakness on her right side from some type of neurological situation, and she would also fatigue easily. One of my recommendations, written at the end of her assessment report, was that she consult with Abbot Francis, with his Chinese medicine hat on. Part of his treatment was to prescribe this medicine for her. He showed it to me once after he met with her. Inside this rectangular box are about ten smaller boxes, each containing a white wax ball, less than an inch in diameter. You carefully pull the two halves of the ball apart like a little plastic Easter egg and inside is the medicine, wrapped in plastic wrap.

“The formula is in the form of a little round blob, the color and consistency of tar. Look here at this list on the box. I remember that one of the ingredients in this formula is myrrh. The reason I remember that is because the three kings in the Gospel story took gold, frankincense, and myrrh with them as gifts when they visited the baby Jesus in Bethlehem on the first Christmas. The gold is thought by some scripture scholars to represent Christ as a royal person or a king; the frankincense is still used today in Chinese medicine to treat pain caused by traumatic injury, swelling, and stagnant blood conditions and indicating the future passion of

Christ. The *myrrh* resin was used as a burial spice in the time of Christ. The women who came to attend to his dead body on the morning of the resurrection brought that with them, only to find the tomb empty.”

“Very interesting, but cut to the chase, Chantal, what ever happened to the lady with the weakness on her right side and the stints of fatigue?”

“The medicine helped her greatly, Dave. Her right side became stronger and her bouts of fatigue lifted. I think Francis gave her some sort of tonic to take after the initial medicine for her physical weakness. Anyway, she was able to accept the promotion at work because of her increased vitality and health. Sometimes there *are* happy endings.”

“Is this where Francis gets his Chinese medicine for his patients?” the detective asked.

“Oh no, Dave, when people ask Francis if his medications are from China, he says that he will only use the most authentic and traditional Chinese formulas available—he gets his via UPS from Brooklyn!”

“By the way, I took some of this Circular Active Formula myself once, out of curiosity and with Francis’ permission. It tastes foul--mainly because of the myrrh I think. It was like taking a handful of incense out of the container used at the Mass of the Resurrection this morning and eating it. My ears rang a little and my head throbbed after I ingested the stuff. I can see how it could clear out the head and help things to circulate, which is its medicinal purpose. If you chop up the little blob, or soak it in warm water for a while it might be easier going down, but you know me, I just grabbed the thing and chewed and swallowed.”

“How very unlike you,” Dave commented with the utmost dryness.

They were on one of the large streets at a very busy intersection and a yellow and red



temple loomed up on the left side of the street. The place had probably been a movie theater in the old days but was now a well-kept *Chan* Buddhist temple. She couldn't resist it: "Is this the kind of place you mean when you talk about going to temple, David?"

"Well, our roots are *middle* eastern, Chantal, not *this far* east. Actually, both of our roots are middle eastern. You were raised as a 'spiritual Semite.' Your roots are Judeo-Christian. Let's have a look at this other type of temple anyway, shall we?"

Chantal continued to marvel at her friend's depth of knowledge about spiritual matters and wondered about other facets of Dave's personality yet to be explored.

The couple entered the spacious and welcoming lobby of the temple and a smiling Asian man wearing wire-framed glasses, sitting in a wheelchair behind a counter, greeted them. There was a little shrine in the lobby area to Kwan-Yin, the Goddess of Compassion. Water gurgled from a four-foot high waterfall that was surrounded by silk and living flowers in another corner. A young Asian woman, with long shiny black hair pulled back in a ponytail, held three incense sticks between her joined hands and was bowing before the statue. She was praying to the Goddess of Compassion. This representation of the deity symbolized and brought to life for her people the great compassion of God. They watched for a while in peaceful stillness, David praying for the peace of all people, especially for peace of the Middle East, and Chantal reflexively reciting a Hail Mary, the Catholic Christian mantra she had learned so long ago.

The bonding spiritual pilgrims next entered the large temple area itself. A huge bright golden Buddha with eyes of great understanding was smiling at them benevolently. He was about the size of a house and rested on the stage of the former theater. On the two side walls was the life story of *Siddhartha*, later know as the Buddha, presented in a series of drawings framed

in slender black wood strips. The various drawings and captions told the story of this wise man and his legacy. Both of the pilgrims here thought it a trace reminiscent of the fourteen Stations of the Cross in a Catholic or Episcopal church. Chantal had an abreactive experience, a psychological healing which puts some old issue into proper place within the psyche. Hers was triggered by the present experience she was having.

One of her “issues” with the institutional Church is, in her perception, the emphasis on suffering and death, but she now remembered her friend Francis explaining that contemporary worshipping communities often added a fifteenth station to the original fourteen “freeze framed” events from the passion and death of Jesus called “stations.” Instead of ending at the crucifixion, the journey along the *via dolorosa* could now end at the Resurrection. Thoughts of the Mass of the *Resurrection* she had celebrated with the others earlier—*all* are celebrants now, laity as well as clergy. The priest is the presider at the liturgy but all celebrate it. Death and resurrection, suffering and healing, yin and yang--all of this is the stuff of life in every culture.

“David, you know I’m an agnostic, but I can’t resist that incense and the possibility of the Divine existing. I’m going to light some incense and offer it to the Buddha the way the other people here are doing. Care to join me?”

“My religious beliefs are rooted in Judaism but I do respect other traditions and will happily join you.” *Should I be wearing my yarmulke?*

“Being of Catholic background and all, you are more used to the incense thing than I am, so I’ll follow your lead,” reverently responded the middle-aged man who was mellowing more by the day. Even his body was going through a metamorphosis. He had lost some weight in recent months and was down to about two hundred pounds, which fit his just over six foot frame a little

better than the extra thirty pounds he had carried with him in the past.

They went up to what Catholics would call a “kneeler” and did what they had seen others do. They each took three sticks of incense and lit them from the oil lamps burning in front of the Buddha. They placed them between their joined palms and bowed three times. Then they took the incense sticks and placed them in the sand pit at the feet of the Buddha where the incense would continue burning. Each stayed and prayed quietly for a few moments. She didn’t know chapter and verse and thus wouldn’t make a very good Baptist, but Chantal whispered a line from Psalm one hundred forty-one for David and the Buddha to hear: “Let my prayer rise as incense before you, O Lord, and may the raising up of my hands be like an evening oblation.” When they stood up to walk out, Dave asked Chantal about her experience in the temple.

“It was very interesting and peaceful, but you can’t have incense without lots of people coughing in the congregation; it just doesn’t work, I mean it’s simply part of the deal.” David just smiled, knowing that this was a reference to Chantal’s Catholic upbringing and experience. It was *deeply* a part of her. Even though she continued to struggle with some of the teachings and practices of the Church, many of which were presented in a more understanding and *understandable* way by recent changes in the Church, she respected the Church very much.

In this sacred place, and with the earlier church experience at Transfiguration, their talk drifted back to some months earlier when they helped solve the murders of a rather progressive Catholic woman theologian and another religious leader who was quite different from the theologian. Their link was Abbot Francis de Sales, who helped to keep the situation from becoming too volatile, risking his own neck, and almost being murdered himself in the process. Francis was an interesting mix. He was clearly rooted in his own tradition and Christ-centered,

yet had a sort of “room enough for all” philosophy about the world and spirituality. His spiritual theology was not a hybrid and he did not believe that one could simply interchange religions, but Francis celebrated all that people shared in common and respected what was different from him. The Christian monk agreed with the Dalai Lama regarding mixing religions. He teaches that: “You can’t put a yak’s head on a sheep.” Francis’ little monastery existed for the glory of God and the good of others, it was as simple as that.

Chantal broke their mutual reverie. “I wonder how our brothers and sisters at the Salesian Monastery are doing. We haven’t been there in a while. It might be nice to visit them under happy circumstances.”

David, as he came out of his trance-like state, said that he was wondering very much the same thing. “They’ve been on my mind lately, along with everything else that’s been happening. If we don’t hear from them soon, why don’t we just pay a little visit?”

### Chapter 13

Hester, clearly a woman with a mission, solemnly handed Trooper Jonas two plastic baggies. One baggie contained a copy of the *Introduction to the Devout Life* by St. Francis de Sales found “at the scene” as the novice detective put it. The other baggie held an empty cellophane bag, which had contained Cheez Twists snack food before someone or something had eaten them all. The Cheez Twists bag tugged at Hester’s heart a little. She had bittersweet memories of that snack food.

“I’m certain I found the spot where Brother Matthew was last Saturday evening. That book in your hand is foundational to the spirit of this monastery and it also has ‘Salesian

Monastery' written in it." Detective Hester continued by reiterating what she had only recently learned from Brother Matthew, "Members of monastic communities own nothing in their own right. Everything is there for their *use* only, and is to be shared. Normally, books would have the name of the monastery written in it rather than an individual member's name. Sometimes an individual will put his or her own name in it if that were more prudent, due to the possibility of it getting lost outside of the building, something like that. This book had the traditional wording of the monastery in it so they could not specifically state that Brother Matthew had this book with him at Beltzville Lake, but it certainly pointed in that direction."

"Good work, Hester." *This woman should have been a lawyer.* "We will check on this to make sure it was not left there by another community member, but it does give us a little more information. The empty Cheez Twists bag leaves me a little confused, however," stated the trooper.

Hester got huffy. "Well, Trooper Jonas, it is crystal clear to me. That empty bag was found in the brush near where the book was found. Brother Matthew was either eating Cheez Twists or whoever took him away left this bag behind."

"That bag could be from anyone, Hester. It's a real long shot that it belonged to someone who *may* have kidnapped Brother Matthew. Anything could have happened to that young man. Isn't he about to take his simple vows or first vows, or whatever they call it, very soon?"

"That's right, Trooper Jonas. You aren't suggesting that he got 'cold feet' are you?"

"Well, that is a possibility. People do that with marriages all the time. My fiancée did that to me some years ago. Left me waiting at the altar—tux, carnation, rings, and everything." Trooper Jonas caught himself and stopped pouring out his soul to Hester and the

group. He was not sure just what triggered his bout of self-disclosure. That was very unlike him, especially while on duty.

“His abbot taught him to be a lot more forthright than that, Trooper. If he were considering putting off his vowed commitment, he would have discussed it with someone, and not just run away. Also, I don’t think he would have been eating yesterday. Brother Matthew fasts periodically and he was at Beltzville Lake on a hermit day and was probably fasting there as well. That leaves either the perpetrator, if there was one, or just visitors to the park. Visitors at Beltzville are few at this time of year, but the bag looks very new, and there are still some fresh golden crumbs inside.”

“You have very fine logical skills, Hester. You’ve convinced me. I will send both of these items to the lab for analysis, fingerprints, that sort of thing. We need to bring a detective in on this because it’s getting complicated and our barracks here has lots of other cases to deal with also.”

“I understand, Trooper Jonas. Just don’t desert us. Your level-headed presence has been invaluable thus far.” As Hester heard these words coming out of her, she felt herself blush. It had been many years since Hester Von Kiel blushed—except for the mauve blotches on her neck when she was anxious.

“Please forgive me if I sounded a little high and mighty. Brother Matthew has encouraged me to lighten up and I have. It has been wonderful indeed. I’m afraid that I regressed a little just now. Trooper Jonas, I do hope that I have not offended you.”

“Not at all Hester.” Then he heard himself say something completely out of character: “I like a woman who fights back.” Now it was his turn to blush.

Unconsciously gripping the pen in his hand as if his hand were frozen mid-stream, the trooper found himself staring into the eyes of this deceptively simple woman. All at once he caught himself and put down the pen, coughed, rearranged some papers, and told her that he would certainly stay in touch. He also mentioned that he hoped they would meet again soon. *Was Freud right? Is life composed of two major instincts--eros and thanatos? Life and death seemed to be the two major struggles. Living and dying, cycled through over and over again, they were indeed the Paschal Mystery. Then again, just plain love in bloom might be fun too.*

#### Chapter 14

Rob and Mary Williams walked along Main Street in the historic section of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. They had just finished lunch and were on their way to the office of Steven Cooper, Ph.D., a marriage and family therapist. The cream-colored bell tower of Central Moravian Church, just off the Hill-to-Hill Bridge, loomed up ahead of them gracefully, like a silent music concert to God. The bright and sunny afternoon stood in stark contrast with the stormy inner feelings of this young married couple. Rob and Mary had recently lost a young child, their first and only one. Doctor Johnson-Angelo did everything medically possible for the little boy but sometimes that is still not enough to save a life. Their marriage was clearly in danger after that. Mary appeared apathetic to just about everything in life. Rob seemed to be working harder at living but was feeling depleted by the lack of response from his wife.

Abbot Francis de Sales, who had treated Rob individually for a brief period of time, made the professional referral to the outstanding marriage and family therapist they were on their way to see for the very first time. Dr. Steve Cooper and Abbot Francis had attended Moravian

College as undergraduates, right there in Bethlehem. Both of them were a little older than the college population of those days. Steve had been in the service and Francis had been through postulancy, novitiate, and the early years of vowed monastic life. The first course they took together was called “Behavior Disorders” and the friends sometimes joked about that course setting the tone for their relationship of nearly thirty years. Steve’s wife was instantly a part of the relationship, though she was working while hubby went to school early on. Later the roles of the married couple reversed but the three always remained good friends, many other people becoming part of the enlarging circle of friends over the years.

The historic red brick building, beautifully refurbished by Steve and his wife, stood just a few blocks off of Main Street. Several other health care professionals in various specialties shared office space in this building as well. The nervous man and woman found their way to the waiting room in the building and had a seat. Soft music filled the high-ceilinged room and coffee simmered on a warmer. Mary flipped through the pages of an old magazine without comprehending what she was looking at; she sat there as if in a trance. Rob filled a cup full of spring water from the water cooler in the corner and never drank the water. Before long, happy voices wafted out of Dr. Cooper’s office as he opened his door into the waiting room. An older couple walked out, the man with his right arm in a sling and a cane in the opposite hand, the woman with dark over-sized glasses on. The stresses of their medical problems were causing some marital conflict. The doctor focused on helping them to come up with creative ways to lighten their load of daily tasks, keep perspective, watch their “self-talk,” and not take their frustrations out on one another.

Dr. Cooper gave the seated younger couple a little nod, which non-verbally seemed to say



“I’ll be with you in just a few moments.” Back in his office, the marriage and family therapist made some sketchy notes on what happened during his last session, then pulled out some client information intake forms and placed them on his desk. He believed that this would be a challenging case so he took a few moments to do some deep breathing and get himself centered and focused. His Hungarian and Slovak genes prompted him to say a little prayer, which he did. Then he opened his office door with a smile.

“Please come in, Mr. & Mrs. Williams. I am happy to meet you. May I call you Rob and Mary?”

“Please do, Dr. Cooper,” responded Rob with genuine enthusiasm. Mary gave a weak smile, wishing she had stuck with her resolve not to go to this session.

The couple got settled on a couch and Steve sat behind his desk for a few moments taking name, address, birth dates, social security, health insurance information, et cetera. The young man and woman looked around at the office. Its muted colors provided a feeling of comfort and warmth. The certificate from the American Association of Marriage and Family Therapists indicated that their doctor was not only a member of that prestigious specialty organization, but that he was an approved supervisor—certified to train others in his field.

After the initial intake information had been gathered and recorded, Steve walked around in front of the desk and sat in a comfortable chair to one end of the couch and facing toward the couple. The chair was angled so that he was not directly facing the couple and could glance at them and away easily. This was one of the first things he learned in his psychotherapy training, just a few blocks away at Moravian College. At the time he felt the class on the placement of furniture in an office, complete with drawings on a blackboard, was silly. Now he saw it as

eminently practical. The furniture placement created ease and freedom in what can sometimes be a frightening and intimidating situation, but which typically became comfortable, insightful, and challenging before very long in Steve's presence.

“Abbot Francis gave me just the briefest sketch of your situation, but I'd really like to hear from each of you what you perceive as happening right now, and how you think I might be of some help to you both, and to your marriage.”

Typical of Western patients, both parties were rather passive in the presence of the doctor. They much preferred to be given a pill or being told what to do. It was clear to Steve that neither of those approaches would even *begin* to fix this situation. Again, Rob spoke up first: “Our marriage has just about a flicker of life left in it, Doctor Cooper. We wanted a child for the first years of our marriage but it didn't appear like that was going to happen. Then, unexpectedly, we did become pregnant. After having our little baby for not quite a year, he was taken away from us in death. I believe in faith that he is still with us but something inside of me *feels* very differently.

Mary and I barely talk to one another. If I start a conversation, it doesn't seem to go anywhere. *We* don't, for that matter, go anywhere either. Life has become going to work and taking care of the house and that's about it. We don't dislike one another but there doesn't seem to be much passion in our relationship.”

Before Rob could continue on or Dr. Cooper respond, Mary broke in: “You might as well tell it like it is, Rob. I don't have anything to say to you or anyone else these days. I go through the motions of my day. I manage to get to work, take care of the house, and get lost in TV or books most evenings and weekends. I don't feel like relating to anyone ever again. It

makes coming to a session like this exquisitely painful for me. I'm sorry, Doctor." A mix of sorrow, anger, and frustration washed out of the young woman and into the room.

"I'm sorry, too, Mary. I also understand—at least as best I can. I have not been through exactly what you're going through but know that it is one of the most painful life experiences a person can endure. You both may know that when a couple loses a child, and I am sorry to say this, it greatly increases the probability of that marriage not surviving."

This piece of information made Rob's heart race even faster, and Mary's head bowed down a little further yet toward her lap. The intake interview continued for about another half hour. Steve got as much information about the "family of origin" as he could out of both parties. Marital conflict was often related to attitudes developed in the "family of origin" and then brought to the new relationship. When healthy, these attitudes could be very helpful to the marriage in some cases; in other cases the family of origin attitudes could cause expectations or distortions that were not helpful but perhaps even harmful. In either event, the people in therapy needed to be guided into an attitude of personal responsibility, not excusing themselves or blaming others from their pasts.

Steve's preliminary assessment was that the couple was experiencing reactive depression due to the loss of their child. Rob appeared to manifest a very controlled anger while Mary exhibited an apathetic depression. The marriage had a less than a fifty per cent chance of survival, in Dr. Cooper's estimation, without therapy. With it, the odds were slightly more in favor of the marriage remaining intact.

"I think it would be very appropriate for the two of you to see me for a course of marital therapy. I would suggest several months of treatment and then we can reevaluate the situation.

My experience of progress in therapy is that when couples do their ‘homework,’ things move along much more quickly.”

Rob was the responsive one yet again. “What kind of homework do you have in mind, Dr. Cooper?”

“I would like you both to join a gym, you know, a health club.”

“A gym!” shouted a startled and angry Mary. This was the most emotion Rob had seen in his wife in several months, and he liked seeing it there.

It seemed as if the doctor was expecting such a reaction. “That’s right, your body is a sounding board for your mind, and is also influencing it very powerfully. In your case, Mary, the tempo of your being is much too slow for a healthy body, mind, or spirit. Your depression is dragging you down and slowing life down to a dull and listless existence. Rob, your smoldering anger is eating you up inside. You need some ventilation. The old ‘ventilationist’ model of anger is not substantiated in the research. It is only a symptomatic and partial treatment, but it can be very helpful on occasion. Expressing or ventilating anger whenever you feel it can actually *raise* the anger level in many people. You’ve probably seen folks who seem to be angry all the time. They bought into the sixties and seventies pop psychology notion that you need to get *all* angry feelings out in the open all of the time.

“The research on anger is clear. You need to sort out what is an important issue, or a recurrent issue, and respond to that with appropriate and *constructive* anger. Put the less important or lighter material in another category. These would be events and experiences that would probably fade away in an hour or a day anyway. Try not to bother with them. I’m being very direct because you people have been through enough and I want to move this process along

as quickly as possible. You seem like bright and healthy people who can cope with this type of directness.

“Inside yourselves, you are probably thinking that Mary is the problem because she is so apathetic and that you, Rob, are doing all you can to make things work. There’s a little truth in that but the greater truth, the more complete truth, is that your anger, Rob, is part of what is shutting Mary down. She just doesn’t have the strength to deal with direct or indirect anger from you right now. You both have your work cut out for you, and therefore, so do I. Please take a little time to consider what I have offered here today. I’ll see you in about two weeks. My schedule doesn’t permit more frequent visits than that, and you do have some things to think about and also exercising to do. Is it a deal?”

This time Mary responded first. “Some unfathomable voice inside of me says that there is some wisdom in what you have said. I really don’t mean to be offensive, Doctor, and I respect your years of study and experience.”

“That’s quite all right,” Steve said. I respect the two of you as well. Respect is one of the ‘core conditions’ that are foundational to a positive outcome in clinical treatment. If the doctor does not have that for the patient, not much can happen. Respect from a clinical research point of view means that I believe you have within you what it takes to deal successfully with your situation. And I honestly do believe that to be the case.”

The three people made their goodbyes in a more somber way than the previous older couple did. The bumps and bruises on the younger couple were not as obvious either, but just as surely present. When Steve opened the door from his office into the waiting room to show Rob and Mary out, there was a teenage girl with pink and green spiked hair sitting on the couch. She

had enough metal through the piercings in her body to require a ground wire if she were out in an electric storm. Dr. Cooper gave that same non-verbal “I’ll be with you in a few moments” nod to the young girl. She responded by smiling, revealing even more metal--this time on her teeth.

The preoccupied couple left the office and walked out back to Main Street looking at their situation a little differently. Neither was sure how he or she felt about the session yet but something had *shifted* inside both of them, and that type of shift is an essential ingredient for positive change in therapy.

## Chapter 15

A few days after his return from the *Chan* Buddhist monastery, Abbot Francis de Sales and Father Ignatius Lynn, SJ, walked down the winding road from the hilltop retreat house on Cheung Chau Island to the dock. Both men were more than accustomed to dealing with “heavy” issues in their pastoral work so it was fun to chat about lighter matters along the way. At some point in the winding conversation it became clear that Ignatius did not know what “mummers” were.

“I can’t believe you don’t know about the guys who get dressed up in lavish costumes that are bursting with color and glitter every January first and play music in a great big New Year’s day parade in Philly. You have lived all over the world and speak I don’t know how many different languages. What am I going to do with you?” Father Ignatius knew that this lacuna in his “education” would never be forgotten.

They continued their banter as they boarded the large boat, along with several hundred other travelers, and sailed the South China Sea for about an hour until they docked at Lantau

Island once again. Trappist monk Brother Leo, who lived at Our Lady of Peace Monastery on the island, met them at the dock.

The Trappists were celebrating the one hundredth anniversary of their monastery, which was first established in mainland China and later moved to Lantau Island, technically a part of Hong Kong. The three vowed religious hopped into a jeep and took a twenty minute ride to the monastery. They celebrated Mid-morning Prayer of the Liturgy of the Hours in Chinese. Francis knew only medical Chinese from his vocation as a Chinese medicine doctor, but still understood what was being celebrated because of his years of living the rhythm of monastic prayer. Back in his little monastery in Pennsylvania, a similar service was conducted every day, along with the rest of the Liturgy of the Hours.

A monk who was now one hundred years old shuffled into the chapel almost as spryly as Brothers half his age. He had been born the same year as the monastery was founded. Francis was intensely aware of the commonality of monastic life throughout the world and throughout various religious traditions. He had recently spent time with Buddhist monks and now was with Christian monks. Obviously the latter are rooted in Christ and the former in Buddha consciousness, but the unity among them was palpable. *There is room enough for all in this world and in the Church, if only we could let go of our prejudices and our egos. God's table is wide.*

Francis reflected on a term from the Hindu scriptures and teachings. *Advaita* means “nonduality” the monk remembered. The various aspects of creation are all different but that does not mean that the differences are in conflict with one another. At the deepest level, they are all part of a greater Whole. It is *Shakti*, the energy of the Divine that propels the entire universe

and is the source of our wholeness—if we let it be.

After the liturgical celebration, Brother Leo showed his two guests around the monastery and grounds. Many years ago Brother Leo had been a member of the same religious community that Francis had spent most of his life in as well. God called Francis to establish a small monastic community with the same spirit, that of St. Francis de Sales and St. Jane de Chantal, and Brother Leo to enter a more cloistered order, the Cistercians of Strict Observance, commonly called the Trappists. Father Ignatius had lived all over the world, his father having worked for the United States government. He later joined the Peace Corps and saw even more of the world. After joining the Society of Jesus, commonly called the Jesuits, he spent much of his life in Asia. *The twists and turns of following God; how fascinating it is! If only we could do it with grace and peace, and not with anxiety. It makes all the difference.*

The monastery had once taken care of a herd of dairy cows in order to support the community. Eventually this was no longer feasible financially or geographically. The old barn and milking room were still there, in quite a bit of disarray after years of neglect. The monks now helped to support themselves by being part of an “electronic scriptorium,” a computer-based way of making money. The community members did data entry into computers for libraries, hospitals, and other large institutions.

Since the population of Asia is so large in relation to the amount of land available for habitation, the government was a little uneasy about the Trappists having the amount of acreage they had. Brother Leo and his abbot thought that if they could have the land declared a wildlife preserve as well as a sanctuary for various trees and herbage, the government might be more tolerant of their situation. This is indeed what came to pass. The land was lush with trees and



vegetation of every sort. In return, the acreage was all cultivated, studied, and written about.

Trappist monks spent much of their time in silence and rarely leave their monasteries. This was the Order of the famous monk named Thomas Merton. Merton left his monastery rarely, then only for some medical appointments. The one time he was permitted to leave on a major trip he went to Bangkok to give a presentation on monastic interreligious dialogue. A gathering of Christian, Hindu and Buddhist monastics was present. After his presentation, he retired to his quarters to take a shower. He unwittingly touched a faulty electric fan and was electrocuted. Rumors of murder, suicide, and a plan that he was about to desert his abbey anyway abounded. The body of this monk, who found himself in trouble with both his abbot and society by quietly working for peace during the Vietnam War, was ironically and graciously flown back to America in a United States Army plane. He is buried in the Abbey's graveyard at Gethsemane, Kentucky where he spent most of his life.

Ignatius and Francis were honored and excited when they were escorted into the confines of this cloistered community. They saw every nook and cranny of the place and, after the Eucharistic celebration marking the one-hundredth anniversary, which began at noon, they enjoyed a meal with the Trappist community—and even talked during it. Usually a monk reads a spiritual book to the community during meals.

Even though Francis was having the trip of a lifetime, his mind wandered occasionally to his little monastery back in Pennsylvania. He hoped that all was peaceful there. He also knew that being in monastic life was no insurance policy against dealing with the ups and downs of life. It could, in fact, pull one so deeply into the mystery of life that there were indeed more challenges and adventures in a monastery than in lay life. At least that's what Francis' two

Philadelphia police officer brothers told him.

Jeff was very annoyed at the fact that Mutt had not been around much. He was doing all of the guarding of their captive, Brother Matthew. His round little body was filled with anger and fear. What was going on in Mutt's life? Something must be up. Matthew entertained himself by singing psalms, rerunning old adventures in his mind, and placing his trust in God. He was convinced that he could get away from these two bungling jailers but thought that if he did so he would never get to the root of what their motivation was, and maybe not even discover who they were. Matthew was concerned that his community would be wondering about him but he didn't have too many options at present. His abbot was away and the novice monk knew that the others would do whatever they could to find him.

Brother Matthew had also been working on Hester Von Kiel. He was helping her to lighten up and loosen up. Hester was responding surprisingly well. God invites us all to inner freedom, Matthew was convinced, and Hester was finding it. She had a mind that was inquisitive, and a personality that was forceful. If the others in the community were not proactive in seeking him out, he believed that Hester would be. *She is not the kind of woman to sit around and wait for things to happen. Hester is a doer.*

Matthew was drawn out of his deep thoughts by the faint sound of a car outside.

A late model silver Subaru Sedan slowed down in front of the rickety wooden stairs leading to the porch and farmhouse. A man in his late forties, with thick wiry brown hair, stepped out of the car. A woman with similar hair and build matching his five foot ten frame opened the passenger door and got out also. They looked like the older men or women who begin to look like their pet dogs after years of caring for the pet. It would probably be

unmannerly to guess which person was pet and which was human in terms of this couple. They carried matching black briefcases and were both dressed in dark colors. Joel and Rachel Fenstermacher were hesitant to take on this case and proceeded with caution.

While Catholic religious communities were not without their faults, they had so much canonical legislation and history behind them that they almost never had the signs and symptoms of a full-blown cult. Mutt Simko had asked the Fenstermacher's in as consultants on this case. They both had master's level training in group dynamics and deprogramming. When the actual deprogramming cases were not numerous, they gave lectures and workshops on the same topic to anyone who would listen. Their income was not lucrative but life was indeed interesting. A book was also in the making.

Their preliminary background check on the Salesian Monastery indicated that the community followed a Church approved rule of life and that they had the freedom to come and go pretty much at will. The members were also permitted to be in contact with family and friends. Such contact was, in fact, encouraged. All of these things suggested a *healthy* community rather than a cult. The only question in their minds was how obsessed they might be with their leader, Abbot Francis de Sales. They simply didn't know him or have enough information in that area. Obsession with a leader was a major factor in the life of any cult.

Jeff swung the old screen door open, practically knocking it off the hinges it was barely attached to. He welcomed the two deprogrammers, explaining that Mutt had not been around much that day but that they were very welcome. He was, in many ways, relieved to see them. Jeff had been growing more and more anxious about the entire situation. Jeff was a single guy who retired early from his job and who would not be missed for a few days, but he still was not

comfortable with the responsibility of holding a prisoner and now introducing the deprogrammers to the captive. What had been a playful adventure last night was turning into a nightmare. He banged on the door of the holding cell and shouted: “ You’ve got some visitors, monk.” The three people walked into the more than strangely appointed room. On the floor sat the surprisingly peaceful young man, secured by chains around his ankles, which were then fastened into the wall. The couple gave a mutual shutter and looked at each other. *What have we gotten ourselves into?*

“Well, I’ll leave you three alone to get acquainted,” mumbled Jeff as he backed out of the door and slammed it shut as securely as the door would allow. Rachel and Joel peppered Brother Matthew with question after question. They rephrased and repeated the questions over and over again. The Fenstermacher’s talked for hours, attempting to fatigue and confuse their target, and thus weaken him into talking about things which might be held secret by the community. It was dark, late, and very cold when they finished. Matthew drifted off into a troubled and exhausted sleep as the couple drifted into the next room—the parlor. Jeff was asleep on the couch and jumped up like a sack of potatoes bouncing on a flatbed truck when he heard the door open.

Rachel spoke for the couple: “Joel and I see absolutely no evidence of this young man being programmed in any way. What we *do* see is someone who has made a very rational and well-thought out response to a call he believes God has given him. We suggest that you let this man go as soon as possible so that you do not compound the crimes you have already committed. We wash our hands of the entire matter.”

Jeff looked at the couple in amazement. His partner assured him that Brother Matthew was part of a cult and that he had been thoroughly brainwashed. Mutt also said that this was the

reason that Matthew broke his engagement to Mutt's daughter, Christi, and eventually entered the monastery. Their attempt to deprogram him now, during the month of December, was doing him a favor, Mutt had proclaimed. Brother Matthew was scheduled to take his simple or temporary vows the following month, on January twenty-fourth, the Solemnity of St. Francis de Sales. Even though the Church requires that the initial vows be made yearly for three to nine years in the case of this monastery, Mutt knew through his daughter that every Salesian monastic novice must have it in his or her heart that these vows would be for life. The temporary vows were really a concession on the part of the Church to help a candidate think through with complete freedom what he or she was doing when taking such a major step in life. *Don't sound like much of a cult to me, now that I think about it.*

Jeff's adventure with Mutt was becoming more serious and more dangerous by the hour. Mutt was nowhere to be found and Jeff was left with all of this responsibility, and now realized that the basis for it, rescuing a person from throwing his life away because he was brainwashed, was no longer even a valid assumption.

He grasped for straws, but with little enthusiasm. "Are you sure? These brainwashed people can be pretty tricky, can't they?"

Joel spoke this time. "Yes, they certainly can, Jeff. That is why we spent so much time with Brother Matthew. We confused him and we fatigued him and he continued to respond in a rational way. He really knows that he is free to make this commitment, and every bit as free not to make it. We did this evaluation as a favor to Mutt but want to, like Pontius Pilate did with Jesus, wash our hands of the entire matter."

Rachel concluded the deprogrammers' visit to the old farmhouse by telling Jeff that if he

did not release Matthew soon that they would be forced to go to the authorities in order to protect themselves.

## Chapter 16

Dr. Chantal Fleur, forensic psychologist even while reading the newspaper, put down the morning paper next to her cooling cup of coffee and reached for the telephone. She didn't need caffeine to get her jump started today. Before she could pick the receiver up, the phone chimed.

“Chantal, David here. Did you see the morning paper yet?”

“I just saw it. I'm sure you're referring to the item about Brother Matthew from the Salesian Monastery being missing for the last few days.”

“Yes, that's the very item. I checked with the state police. There's just a little flimsy evidence that doesn't point to anything special. Someone found a book, I think it's called *Introduction to the Devout Life* and, get this, an empty bag of Cheez Twists. Trooper Jonas said that the uptight girl, err *woman*, excuse me, from the Catholic Traditionalist Center has been snooping around, trying to dig up clues. He also mentioned that she has mellowed. I'll believe that when I see it. I know, I know, I'm a Jewish doubting Thomas. So was *he*—wasn't he?”

“Cute. Now David, it sounds like you're having a little regression. I understand that you truly respect us womenfolk and that you have done well in cleaning up your act on that score, but you need to continue keeping vigil over your attitude and language. Having said that, I think that *Miss Von Kiel*, as she preferred to be called in those days, was more than a little uptight, but I try to let people grow—like you have to.”

“Guilty as charged, your Honor. Thanks for the homily. Let's say we pay the community

in Brodheadsville a little visit, okay?”

Before long the duo that had helped to solve previous murders connected with the Salesian monastery, and to save the life of the abbot in the process, were on Route 209 headed south toward Brodheadsville. Dave’s unmarked police car had all sorts of lights and scanners and electronic gadgets on the dashboard. When Chantal had called into her office to let them know that she would be out for the morning because of her need to visit the monastery, her administrative assistant told her that a dead body had been found in the field behind the monastery grounds. Chantal’s forensic brain kicked into overdrive. She felt it improbable that the two events were unconnected. She and her partner in crime discussed the matter in the car on the way to Brodheadsville. David concurred immediately, his brain trying to puzzle out the probable relationship between the missing person and the discovered body.

“Our temple is one hundred and fifty years old and we have *never* found a dead body there. We’ve never even had a murder! What is it with this community? Maybe just bad luck. Maybe they should change religions or something.”

Chantal ruminated out loud: “When the forces of good and evil do battle, maybe they choose a receptive spiritual territory to do battle on. One that is open to the spiritual world. Just a thought.”

“What are you talking about, Chantal? You’re not even sure that you believe in God, or has that changed?”

“No, that has not changed, Dave. I *do*, however, believe in forces of good and evil. I see them both operating in the lives of my patients all the time, as well as in the forensic cases I deal with every day. A minority of people just oozes evil, while most others struggle to live a decent

life. I suppose much of it has to do with the backgrounds of the individuals, the way they were treated while growing up. And before you say it, I sincerely believe that each of us is responsible for our own behavior after we've grown up. I don't prescribe to blaming others for our behavior."

"See how nicely we talk to one another now, Chantal? We are really making progress. You are changing too, you know. A little less trigger-happy with your emotions, especially the ones connected with assertiveness. It wasn't too many months ago that we did nothing but fight. We even agree on these basic philosophical issues. I see good and evil do battle every day as well in my job as a detective."

"Agreed my friend; we are both making real progress."

A sprinkling of snowflakes swirled around in the air enveloping their car. The driver put on his left blinker and the car turned into the driveway marked by the red "Salesian Monastery" sign. The red metal sign with white lettering was a little bent out of shape, and the vinyl mailbox on top of the sign pole was taped together with black electrical tape. In the country, knocking over mailboxes is recreation for the young folk. Dave parked the car at the end of the driveway, under the large cross, and the couple got out and walked along the perpendicular top of the driveway toward the main house. The brown-green grass was dappled with clumps of white snow. The wind whistled through the bare trees and a few crows cawed piercingly high above them. The small community was just finishing the Office of Morning Prayer and drifted slowly out of the oratory which was to the left of the visitors.

They waved to Chantal and David and ushered them into the main house, up the steps and on to the porch, through the barn red front door and small foyer, and then on into the dining area.



Dave had called ahead, so the ever-faithful Mr. Coffee machine had been set to brew while the community was at prayer and now it filled the dining room with a mouth-watering decaffeinated aroma. Community and guests shared fruit, cereal, toast, coffee, and tea. Peanut butter was also available—a monastic staple. The modest breakfast seemed to put everyone at ease and to help each person get his or her gears in place for crime solving. Much had changed since their last mystery. They were working now as a team, especially Chantal and Dave. A great complementarity existed among the group: male and female, Jew and Gentile, young and old, and the larger team included black and white, Lutheran and Catholic, and probably a lot of other interesting ingredients to help the mix.

Dave coordinated the meeting. After he brought everyone up to speed on the current status of the situation he added some additional information. Some clear fingerprints had been lifted from the inside of the Cheez Twists bag near the top of the package. The difficulty was that this bag could be totally unrelated to the fact that Brother Matthew was missing. The fingerprints, also, had not yet been identified. The community was unanimous in their opinion that the *Introduction to the Devout Life* book found at the Beltzville Lake campsite belonged to Brother Matthew. Matthew's copy was not in his room and the community knew that he was praying over this book once again, prior to his simple profession which was scheduled for next month's great Solemnity of Saint Francis de Sales.

Chantal asked the community if they had any idea as to why the young monk was missing. Was there someone who had been threatening Brother Matthew, someone with ill will toward him or toward the community, for that matter? The room was dense with thoughtful silence. As Chantal was speaking, a sharp rap on the door followed by the entrance of Hester

Von Kiel took everyone's attention away from Chantal and on to their new guest.

Hester apologized for disrupting the meeting and thanked Sister Jane de Chantal for calling her to let her know that "the team" was getting together. She had a bag of bagels and sticky buns in her arms which she placed them down on the counter, and then she pulled up one of the small benches the community members sit on while eating and leaned her forearms against the refectory table. This woman was into it to the end—no matter what the outcome.

Detective Gold stood and shook hands with the newest member of the team. "Good morning and welcome *Miss* Von Kiel. Thank you for what you found for us thus far."

"You are very welcome, Detective Gold. Please drop the 'Miss.' I'm just Hester now. In formal situations I suppose that I would now prefer *Ms.*" She sounded more and more like Miss Hathaway from the "Beverly Hillbillies" TV show to David with each encounter. "You may find that I'm a tad less 'uptight' as they say. Brother Matthew has been helping me *loosen up*. It's a long story so I won't go into it just now. Perhaps sometime we can meet and trade case histories, now that I'm in the same field as you, in a sense—even though self-appointed—citizens arrests and all that. I overheard just a few words that you folks were saying as I came into the monastery through the foyer. I believe you are trying to get at the motive for the disappearance of Brother Matthew. If I may ask, is that correct dear friends?"

Chantal nodded in the affirmative, still a bit stupefied by Hester, her bagels, and her new attitude.

Hester continued on, acting like Agatha Christi's Miss Marple in her younger days. "Some of you may view me as a middle-aged maiden lady, but I've had my romantic moments. Oh yes, I know the affairs of the human heart--and not just from 'Dear Abby' either!"

David Gold sputtered into his coffee at the sound of the latest pronouncement and was also becoming restless. He wanted to get on with things and this woman seemed to be hijacking his meeting. He held back a little longer. *Is my annoyance at this person there because she is a woman or because she is holding us back from the work our group had gathered here to do?*

“Brother Matthew and I have developed a kind of older sister--younger brother relationship.”

Chantal couldn't resist it. She whispered to David: “Our Brother Matthew is beginning to sound like Jethro Bodine from that old TV show.” Another sputter of coffee. This time he needed a napkin.

“Some of you may remember that Brother Matthew had been engaged. I know that the name of the girl Brother Matthew was engaged to is Christi. I am guessing that it is the same Christi found on the back five acres right here adjacent to the monastery property. The young lady was wearing a diamond engagement ring when she was found. I, of course, discovered the body. It seems just too coincidental that Brother Matthew disappears at the same time his fiancée is found buried behind the monastery.

“Miss Hathaway is pretty sharp,” David mumbled to Chantal. This time she was the sputterer.

“The community members know very well that Brother Matthew is about to take his first vows, making him a monk forever in his heart, and temporarily at first on paper. That is quite a different commitment from the first plans he had for marriage and family. I wonder if someone is either punishing him for not going through with his earlier marriage plans, or trying to prevent him from taking his simple vows.”

No one spoke for a while after that.

## Chapter 17

In former days, when a monastic answered the telephone in a monastery, he or she would not identify himself or herself, but simply mentioned the name of the monastery. This was an attempt to blend in, so to speak, to live in the background in anonymity. Today things have changed a great deal. There is much more emphasis on strengthening one's identity in Christ, becoming more of a whole person as a result. At any rate, Sister Scholastica answered the ringing telephone by identifying the monastery and stating her name. The caller identified himself as the secretary to the Bishop of Scranton and asked to speak to Abbot Francis de Sales. Sister Scholastica's pulse quickened as she explained to the cleric that Abbot Francis was on retreat but that he would be returning the next day. *I'm too new here to be dealing with this sort of thing.*

"The Bishop is quite concerned about the stories circulating in the newspapers the last day or two. He would like Abbot Francis to come in for a little informal chat, so to speak. *That sounds ominous.* Given the fact that Abbot Francis will be returning tomorrow, would you please have him call me as soon as possible upon his return? There is no need to disturb the end of his retreat. If he had a few more days of retreat left, we might have to interrupt it. The matter is very important."

Sister Scholastica assured the Bishop's secretary that he would be given the message and thanked him for the kindness of the diocese to the small community. The secretary defrosted a speck and asked for the prayers of the community, then they both said their goodbyes.

Meanwhile in contemporary times at the Kripalu Center in Lenox, Massachusetts, Brother Francis, Abbot of the Salesian Monastery, pulled himself out of an entire day of meditation by the lakeside across the road from the main grounds of the Kripalu Center for Yoga and Health. He let his campfire die as he got up and stretched, looking a little like a cat getting up after a long nap in the sun. Francis did several yogic asanas, postures that included the Tree, the Dancer, the Camel, Upward Dog, Downward Dog, the Sun Salutation, and the Moon Salutation. The Holy Spirit had enveloped the monk for hours and led him through many of the events of recent years in his life. It was as if he re-lived every experience, though at a deeper and more meaningful level. He traveled to Asia and back in his spirit. He felt confirmed and renewed in his vocation.

The tapestry of his life was threaded with beautifully colored strands. Though it looked tangled and knotted on one side, the other side created a beautiful picture. So taught one of his holy founders, Saint Francis de Sales. Though chronologically in his mid-fifties, the monk's spirit was as young and vital as ever. His day of spiritual flashbacks to earlier experiences on his journey through life filled the Christian monk with gratitude for his present life situation and all that led up to it, the good and the not so good.

*What a glorious way to wrap up my retreat. I know this is not the typical setting for a monastic retreat but it certainly refreshes me in body, mind, and spirit. In that spirit of refreshment I hear you so much more clearly, Lord. Thank you for being here. Thank you for also providing me with a number of wonderful spiritual directors over the years so that I am not leading myself, but being accountable to you through the ministry of others who listen to my life experience and provide valuable feedback and reverential guidance.*

Brother Francis walked through the barren woods, which were whitewashed with snow

at this mid-December time of year, toward the road that he would cross over to get onto the immediate grounds of the Kripalu Center. There were mounds of snow all around and the sky was filled with more. He hoped that he would be able to get home tomorrow as planned. The drive would take more than five hours, including a few stops along the way. He had several books-on-tape with him, borrowed from the local library, which speeded his journey back and forth in the car. Francis liked to listen to mysteries on long trips. Spiritual, medical, and psychological literature was fine for home but it did not engross him enough or pass the time as quickly for him while driving. The only problem with the taped mystery books was that Francis could easily miss a turn when he became absorbed in one of the “whodunits.”

The Visitation Monastery, which had moved after living one hundred years of monastic life in Wilmington, Delaware to the Berkshire Mountains of Tyringham, Massachusetts, was just about ten miles away from the Kripalu Center. It made it so convenient for him to attend Eucharist and some of the celebrations of the Divine Office with the nuns who formed part of his spiritual Salesian family. It is quite unusual to have religious orders of men founded by women. This is the case, however, with the Salesian family. Saints Francis de Sales and Jane de Chantal founded the Order of the Visitation of Holy Mary, a monastic community of women. The Visitation eventually founded the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales, an active order of religious brothers, priests, and sisters, and his little Salesian Monastery grew out of that order. This was his lineage.

There was still time left for a whirlpool and sauna before Francis was scheduled to leave Kripalu the next day. He could certainly use that, even though he had a yogic workout by the lake. The monk had just spent hours in meditation and would spend more hours in the car so he

thought it a good idea to loosen up more completely.

Warm bubbling water whirled about him in the whirlpool. No one else was in the whirlpool at this time. Many of the other retreatants were at a concert consisting of Asian spiritual music in the main chapel. The massive building had a strangely quiet aura.

*I wonder how things are at home. If any major appliances or cars are broken, Lord, we can handle it together. It is unlikely that dead bodies will be in the picture. We dealt with them not very long ago. I better get out now. I tend to stay in this thing too long and then get dizzier.*

There was a series of small dorms on the third floor of the huge red brick building, dorms that Francis referred to as “steerage.” Three or four sets of bunk beds were in each large and clean room and it made the accommodations fee less expensive by choosing this type of housing. There was only one other retreatant in Francis’ particular dorm. He was a New England police officer who struggled between being a yoga teacher and a law enforcer. He seemed to do very well at both professions. The two occupants of the dorm wanted quiet and thus found the other one easy to get along with. The next morning Francis awoke and glanced at the clock, which displayed 4:30 in large red numbers. Francis liked this time of morning, when everything was still and in darkness. It was vigil time. He would keep vigil today by praying the psalms and readings, which make up the Office of Vigils as he always did, and also by doing some wholistic body-mind spiritual exercises.

The crisp clean air drifting in through the open window next to his lower bunk is what really awakened him. His dorm mate was still deeply asleep. *Well, at least I won’t get arrested or get any tickets.*

After a quick cleanup, Francis went down the stairs and out the large glass front doors to

greet the dawn, which was just being signaled by the sound of a few birds. He began by practicing some qigong. His arms and legs seemed to lead the rest of his body through various flowing movements. Francis had mastered these dance-like movements long ago so that his mind in no way interrupted the flow his body was doing. Lifting the Sky, Carrying the Moon, Connecting Heaven and Earth—these movements were part of a meditation in motion suspended time and space for him.

The darkness began to give way to a hint of pink, orange, and just a tinge of red. The mountains slowly emerged from the darkness. *Thank you Jesus, thank you Jesus, thank you Jesus*, emerged from within the soul of the monk as he danced the day into being with the mighty help of his Creator. Now that it was near six in the morning, Francis returned to the building and made his way to the Forest Room on the second floor where he would spend another hour and a half doing yoga with perhaps about forty other people.

The yoga instructor this morning was one of his favorites. Her quiet voice and clear instruction drew him into another moving meditation. The first movements of his morning were of Chinese lineage; now these movements were East Indian in origin. His yoga mates were an interesting mix: a woman in her late thirties who was an advertising executive from New York City, a man from the area who had his own construction company, a college student from the Midwest who was here to rejuvenate himself and decide on his major before returning to school. Two young women from Iceland were there for a workshop and yoga training, as was a business executive from Germany who said that he was here on business and mixing it with some pleasure.

Meals at the Kripalu Center are all vegetarian and all delicious. Brother Francis filled his



tray with steaming hot cereal, fruit, homemade bread and peanut butter, and Cafix--fake coffee--no stimulants allowed here. He went down the two flights from the dining room and back out the front doors he had used over three hours ago and ate his breakfast looking at the Berkshire mountains and the steaming lake in front of him. Chipmunks came by begging for food.

For a while there had been a sign up asking guests not to feed the chipmunks because it makes them aggressive. There were a few people in his life whom he thought he might stop feeding and see what happened. Francis hadn't seen them in years and thought that maybe they were not aggressive anymore. He tried to give people room enough to change. In this frame of mind, Francis recalled a friend who told him that chipmunks were nothing more than rats in tuxedos. He tried to get his mind back on more spiritual things. Then he wildly broke the rule, and threw out a few bits of toast on the lawn. He was immediately swamped with not only aggressive chipmunks but also with diving birds. *There is a reason behind why signs go up! Community living made that very clear but we sill forget.*

After breakfast, Francis strolled around the grounds for a while and digested his morning experiences. He next went up to the health services wing at the Center for a Chinese healing massage called *tui na*. Fortunately, the monk had no health problems but, since he was a Chinese medical specialist, he tried to live by the philosophy of Chinese medicine—live in such a way that you remain healthy and if you do, when you are ill, you are more likely to recover from it quickly.

A professional who was also versed in Chinese medicinal herbs treated Francis. His session lasted about an hour and a half and his twelve major meridians, the channels through which the qi flows, were opened and balanced during the treatment. Chinese bodywork is not

always quite as relaxing as western bodywork, though it can be. There can even be some jostling around of the patient by the therapist. Francis was used to this from his trips to hospitals in China where he studied and experienced this type of treatment, along with the other forms of Asian healing which he studied. He was able to drift into a semi-sleep while he was poked and prodded, stretched and compressed. *One more wonderful whirlpool experience and a vegetarian lunch and then it's on the road for a beautiful drive back to the monastery. It is time.*

Francis allowed himself to talk at the lunch that day, using the large dining room rather than the smaller one where retreatants maintained silence. The head of the kitchen staff, a woman from Asia with a wonderful sense of humor and a dazzling smile, came over and slipped a few large freshly baked cookies, wrapped in a paper towel, into Francis' hand. She quietly mumbled: "put them away, put them away." She couldn't do that for everyone and didn't want to call attention to her little gift or start a minor riot.

The retreatant stopped in the meditation room for about fifteen minutes, thanking God for the wonders of creation and for his life. He prayed also for all people in need and remembered his family, friends, and community at the same time.

The monk always felt full of life and joyful after an experience at this sacred place. He packed the car quickly and began his journey through the beautiful Berkshire Mountains, the forests of Connecticut, the green of New York State, and back to the hills of Pennsylvania. He spent the first hour in silence in the car and then popped in a murder mystery book-on-tape. *It's a good thing those murders we dealt with some months ago are behind us. All's well that ends well.*

## Chapter 18

The little house felt so profoundly empty. It seemed as if every breath echoed through the rooms of the small building in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. The breathing was not natural—more like being on a respirator in intensive care. The once cheery nursery was now a catchall room, filled with empty boxes, plastic bags, high chair, playpen, bottles, and baby clothes. Rob gravitated toward books for anesthesia, and Mary toward the TV--remote control channel changer ever at the ready. During his last appointment with the mourning couple, Dr. Cooper had suggested that the couple work on a common project. December was not the time one could plant a garden or trim the bushes, or even paint the outside of the house. The cellar needed a good cleaning out, but it was one of those projects easily put off because it was largely unseen. A lot of junk had collected in only a few years of marriage.

“No time like the present to begin our common project, I suppose. What say we start to clean out the basement?” asked Rob with a large amount of forced cheeriness in his voice.

“I guess so.” Mary looked about as enthused as an eight year old boy who had won at playing “Spin the Bottle” at a birthday party.

Rob led the way, and Mary forced herself to follow. He opened the basement door and turned on the light. They crept down the old cellar steps in unison, one force pulling them forward, the other force pulling them back. The workbench at which Rob fixed household items and did a little woodworking was easily the main eyesore. Tools were scattered all about and sawdust graced the tabletop and the floor around the workbench. Sawdust footprints moved off in all directions, fading as they progressed. An overflowing trashcan stood near the washer and dryer, bursting with dryer lint, empty liquid detergent bottles, and soda cans. Translucent fabric

softener sheets clung to just about everything in the trash container. Soap powder was sprinkled everywhere, creating material for even more footprints. Metal hangers were scattered on the shelving above the appliances like shrapnel from a duel at a laundromat. “I’ll take my anger out on the workbench area if you will struggle with your depression in the laundry area,” Rob said, trying to lighten the atmosphere.

Mary came out with her usual unenthusiastic affirmative reply, which only fanned the fire of Rob’s anger. He had been reading up on the various topics that surfaced during their treatment with Dr. Cooper. Research and clinical experience indicates that procrastinators do well to begin even a little corner of a job, much like putting one toe or finger in the cold water. After a while, the job begins to draw the person into it and eventually some enthusiasm can result.

Before long, Mary reached over to a rickety white metal table and clicked on an old clock radio. Mellow sounds from the seventies and eighties drifted out of the battered means of communication. The soothing liquid voice of disk jockey “Delilah,” along with her “Lehigh Valley love sounds,” wove together a mosaic of work, music, and healing.

The couple was non-verbally connecting at a very unconscious level. Just as Mary did not ask Rob’s permission to turn on the radio, so too, Rob went up and put some microwave popcorn into the oven without mentioning anything to Mary. The tempting aroma filled the basement within minutes, even managing to penetrate the dankness and sawdust smells. The happy sound of popping lifted their spirits ever so slowly. One more trip up and down the steps on Rob’s part and the couple was munching popcorn daintily with dirty fingers as they hummed along to Delilah’s love sounds coming out of the radio. The room was shaping up, as were the feelings of the young couple. Several hours had passed and the basement looked dramatically

better. The couple *felt* dramatically better. Rob and Mary dragged up and out several large black bags of trash. Sweaty and dirty, they hugged and cried. After showers and hot chocolate, they drifted off to the most serene sleep either had experienced in months.

A little after three in the morning Mary woke up to find Rob doubled over, feverish, and groaning in extreme pain. She couldn't get a clear answer as to what was wrong with him. Rob was not really sure himself. All he knew was that his abdominal area felt like he had eaten ground glass.

"Let's get you to the hospital, Rob."

Rob knew very well that Mary had seen more than enough of hospitals in the recent past because of dealing with the sickness and death of their son—so had he for that matter. "I'll be all right; maybe it can wait until morning." With that, he let out a scream.

Mary said: "The only choice you have is whether I take you there myself or whether we call 911."

"You win, Mary. Let's see if I can make it down to the car and that way we will cause less disruption for our neighbors by avoiding an ambulance ride."

Rob put on the most comfortable things he could think of--sweat pants and a sweatshirt. He found it difficult to unfold himself but slowly came partially out of his fetal position and hobbled down the stairs after Mary, who went before him to break his fall should he lose his balance. Slowly and carefully she helped Rob into their car. She shut the door after him and got into the driver's seat. As they backed out of the driveway they passed the bundles of trash they had collected that evening in their healing ritual. *Just when there was a glimmer of hope.*

The Lehigh Valley Hospital emergency department was the epitome of controlled

professional chaos. Competent nurses, doctors, technicians, and administrative workers took care of people with nighttime emergencies. The housekeeping staff kept the place spotless.

The western medical machine, a system that seemed to have a life of its own, admitted Rob to the hospital and he was then mildly sedated. Within hours he was calmer and relatively free of discomfort. Angel Carlos, D. O., gastroenterologist, scoped the patient early that morning. The upshot of that test, an extensive clinical interview, and an array of other studies indicated that Rob was suffering from irritable bowel syndrome, sometimes called colitis, or simply I. B. S. He was told to go on a bland diet for a few days in order to calm his digestive system down, given a prescription of a medication called Bentyl, and referred to Dr. Francis de Sales O’Neill, clinical psychologist and behavioral medicine specialist for Chinese medicine treatment, and perhaps some clinical hypnosis. That was the only pleasant surprise in the ordeal for Rob and Mary. *Another glimmer of hope.*

When the couple returned home, Rob and Mary read the re-print of a brief article from a research journal that the gastroenterologist gave them while Rob did his stint in the hospital. It was written in a scientific fashion but well worth reading.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **THE IMPACT OF MEDICAL QIGONG UPON CLINICAL TREATMENT OUTCOME<sup>4</sup>**

by Brother/Doctor Francis de Sales O’Neill, SMC, EdD, IABMCP

As a Doctor of Clinical Psychology specializing in Behavioral Medicine, I have spent

most of my professional life treating patients with serious medical disorders. The use of such modalities as clinical hypnosis, biofeedback, relaxation training, bodywork therapy, and medical qigong are employed by me within the context of psychotherapy when treating such patients. Many of the people I am honored to treat are dealing with chronic pain, multiple sclerosis, gastrointestinal problems, various forms of cancer, and mood disorders such as panic attacks and depression.

I have practiced some form of *personal* cultivation qigong most of my adult life. During the last fifteen years or so, this personal cultivation has grown into ever-increasing *medical* qigong training and clinical practice. I began to wonder, as this evolved, about the impact of medical qigong on the quality and length of treatment for my patients. A review of the clinical charts of my patients (counting the number of treatment sessions to termination of therapy) representing more than twenty-five years of clinical practice indicates that when medical qigong is added to one or more of the other modalities used, remediation of symptoms occurs more quickly (often beginning with the first session or two) and the number of treatment sessions decreases by about fifty per cent. More specifically, a mean of approximately fifty sessions per patient is reduced to approximately twenty-five through the addition of medical qigong treatment along with patient self-cultivation as instructed by me.

As scientists, we may reasonably wonder about the impact of years of clinical experience upon length of treatment. In other words, would not one expect the doctor to hone his or her clinical skills over the years and thus experience a decrease in the number of treatment sessions necessary for a positive outcome as a result? Addressing this as a control factor, I studied the charts of patients for whom medical qigong was *not* used during the past ten years, i.e.,

psychotherapy as the sole modality, and found that treatment did progress faster than when I began my career, but only by about twenty per cent. Comparing this to the fifty per cent decrease noted above suggests that adding medical qigong to the clinical treatment decreases favorable outcome time by an additional thirty percent.

A related benefit of medical qigong in clinical practice is that, at least in my case, the doctor is less depleted, more creative, more empathic, and is thus more likely to communicate this positive attitude to his or her patients. Numerous empirical studies, including the extensive one referenced below (Seif, 1981b), clearly support the therapeutic effect of such an attitude on the part of the practitioner.

My reading of the scientific literature indicates to me that the etiology of most disorders is multi-factorial. Is it not logical, then, to employ several modalities in treating such disorders that arise from a synthesis of many causes? East and West need the wisdom that the other contains, in my opinion, in order to make our world a healthier and happier place in which to live. Medical qigong appears to be a wonderful bridge to this end.

#### Reference

Seif, B. (1981b). The Effect of Counselor Religious Orientation upon Student Perception of Counselors. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 42. 1015A. (University Microfilms No. 81-18850).

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Rob scratched his head and ran his fingers through his disheveled hair. The journal article was as dry as dust, which was typical of most good research articles. Scientists needed to be objective and unemotional in reporting their data. More importantly, the sense he was left with after reading the study was that medical qigong has a genuinely positive impact upon the process of treatment, be it of the body, mind, or spirit. Seeing Abbot Francis again might not only help his present physical crisis but might also help the progress in marriage therapy with his wife. His glimmer of hope grew into a *ray* of hope.

## Chapter 19

Late afternoon in the Poconos was in all ways a very beautiful time for Francis; most of the drive from his retreat at the Kripalu Center was now behind him. A brief stop for grilled cheese and salad at a diner had revived Francis from his trip, and speculating about “whodunit” in the book-on-tape he was listening to on his journey south from New England kept his mind occupied during the simple meal. Grilled cheese is a real staple for a lacto-vegetarian. Vegetarians who are “vegan” refrain from all meat and fish, as do lacto-vegetarians, but vegans also refrain from all dairy products, including eggs, cheese, butter, and milk. That was too complicated for Francis, especially if he was visiting family or friends. He did not want to be of any unnecessary bother to them and cooking for a vegan would challenge most cooks.

Francis sometimes “goes wild” and gets his grilled cheese sandwiches on two different kinds of bread. Today he dined on one rye and one whole-wheat grilled cheese. He stopped to eat far before he got to his hometown, hoping to avoid patients or parishioners from the local parish. He liked those people well enough but was trying to savor and digest the fruits of his

retreat. His long-term goal was to let the seedlings of the graces he had gleaned during retreat grow throughout the year as a means of helping others and himself to a more peaceful and whole place in life. Sometimes retreat graces took the form of a resolution to be more patient with others, at other times a retreat might yield the thought that God might be asking him to slow down a little with his workload.

After dinner, and before very long, he found himself zigzagging through a few roads in Brodheadsville and then turning left onto the monastery property. Everything seemed peaceful enough, Francis reflected to himself, as he pulled the little red car into the monastery garage. He took some time to bring his luggage to his cell, turned on the computer in his office, and slit open a large stack of mail. These rituals, upon returning from a trip, often helped the monk to clear his mind before talking with the other members of the community.

The abbot then went to the oratory to join the community for Night Prayer, the Office of Compline that completes the day. Before they began the service, he stood at the ambo and said hello to his companions in monastic life. He told them that he had a refreshing retreat and said that he hoped that they were well. He then asked how things were in the community. Their tales of a dead body and a missing community member evoked thoughts of Stephen King and “Murder She Wrote.” A combination of information overload, along with an attempt to practice the virtue of equanimity of spirit, helped Francis to avoid an impulsive response. *Well, at least no major appliance had broken.* As if on cue, the heater in the oratory exploded, then thumped and then rattled into stillness.

The Office of Vigils begins every monastic day. It is the time when the community members gather before dawn to wait for God to break into the day and reverence their faith-filled

belief that Christ will come again at the end of time. The Office of Night Prayer or Compline, on the other hand, brings the day to an end. Most of this last liturgical service of the day is chanted in darkness, by candlelight. Part of the experience is to examine one's consciousness, raise one's awareness of the choices he or she made during the day for good or for ill, rejoice in what is good, and resolve to work with what may be weak during the new day yet to come. After Night Prayer, the community begins its experience of Grand Silence. During that time they keep a stricter silence than during the day, listening for the voice of God deep within their hearts as they read, prepare themselves for a night of rest, or even if they wake during the night.

Because he is abbot of the community, Francis often has to work after Night Prayer, sometimes returning phone calls if they cannot wait until the next day. He had twenty-six messages on his answering machine and about two hundred e-mails waiting to be sorted out when he returned from his retreat. He listened to phone messages from Dave, Chantal, Hester, and, he could have guessed it, the Bishop's secretary.

He returned a call to Chantal and arranged for a meeting with the "mystery team" the next morning. This is how Dave, Chantal, Hester, and the Abbot were being referred to by the community. He was not completely sure why the Bishop was calling him but would find out later the next day when he went to the Chancery Office for a meeting with the shepherd of the Diocese of Scranton. *It is probably about the missing novice and the dead body found on the field adjacent to the monastery property. Here we go again.*

He was quite worried about Brother Matthew and had mixed feelings about the community keeping all of this information from him while he was on retreat. They had come to a communal decision on the matter, and while he might have acted otherwise, he respected their

maturity and their desire to let the Holy Spirit speak through the group and guide their decision-making.

There was not much more he could do this evening so he tried to distract himself by opening the mail. Francis pulled his old tin Lehigh University trash container close to his desk and began opening envelopes and immediately ripping up and throwing out what was of no value to him or the community. He lit a sandalwood incense stick and tried to turn the effort of moving through the pile of mail into a bit more of a meditation. Journals and material to be read at his “leisure” were placed in one pile, bills were placed by the computer to be entered into the Quicken bookkeeping software, payment checks from various health insurance companies for services he had rendered to patients were placed in another pile--unfortunately this was the smallest of the piles.

He pulled a letter out of a white number ten sized envelope with no return address on it. “Salesian Monastery” and the mailing address were scrawled across the front of it. The abbot thought it might be an order for a handmade prayer bench, Bible stand, or for the qigong teaching video that he had produced, and which was being well received. A cryptic message on the eight-and-one-half by-eleven sheet of white paper greeted him when he unfolded it.

“IF WE CAN’T HAVE THEM, NEITHER CAN YOU.”

The abbot checked the envelope again, wondering if it had come to the wrong address. No, it was clearly addressed to the Salesian Monastery. Having grown up in Philadelphia—the City of Brotherly Love—Francis knew that “you” is often used for the plural of “you” in that

great city. He hesitated for a moment and then threw the paper and envelope into the trash.

Having plowed through the mail, he next went online and checked his e-mails that were waiting for him in the depths of the computer. Once again, he threw most of them into the trash, this time with a “click” rather than with a tear. Ones from family and friends were left in his “in-box” for a more careful reading and response when his head was clearer. He also left some professional messages there. Several had come in from the National Qigong Association USA, an organization in which he served an elected board member.

Francis changed and went to bed, but something above and beyond all the bizarre events in which he had become embroiled during the past few hours tugged at the back of his mind.

*What is it? What is it Lord?*

The mystery team assembled in the community library the next morning after the regular morning spiritual exercises and breakfast. The main piece of information to emerge from the meeting to the mind of the returning abbot was the fact that the girl found buried in a shallow muddy grave on the back five acres of the monastery was a young lady positively identified as Christi Simko--none other than the ex-fiancée of Brother Matthew. The community had tried to ease him into the events that occurred during his time away and didn't give him all of the details last evening. This was still an abrupt transition, indeed, for Francis from his retreat. *Romeo is missing and Juliet is dead.*

Later in Scranton: “The Bishop will see you now Brother Cadf... Excuse me, I mean Abbot Francis de Sales,” announced the administrative assistant of the Bishop to the monk “on the carpet.”

“What did you just almost call me? Were you starting to say ‘Brother Cadfael,’ the

mystery novel monk from the middle ages who was an accomplished herbalist and who had a penchant for finding dead bodies and solving crimes. Was that it?"

The soul of efficiency replied that she had made a slip of the tongue and confessed that many were calling him Brother Cadfael these days. She didn't mean to offend him.

"No offense taken. In fact, I think that there is a compliment in there somewhere," said the monk in a light-hearted manner.

There was a change of key, however, when the abbot walked in through the heavy oak doorframe to the office of the Bishop.

"What is this *penchant* you have for dead bodies and intrigue, Brother?" asked the Bishop, when Brother Francis was just about seated.

"Well it's only *one* body this time, Your Excellency."

"Don't you go trying to disarm me with that sense of humor of yours again. I'm not as likely to let you off the hook easily this time. We've been down this road before, you and I."

For once in his life, Francis really didn't know what to say. He hadn't done a thing to create any of this mess. All he did was go away on a well-deserved retreat, a retreat that the Rule asks each monastic to take every year. "I'm sorry, Bishop, I really don't know what more I can say. I will do everything in my power to handle these matters discretely and quickly."

"I realize that it's not your fault, Brother, but for one of the smallest religious communities in this diocese, you folks get the most press. Why, the papers are starting to call you 'the mystery monk.'

"Kind of catchy, don't you think?"

"Now stop that Brother!"

“There is that other matter in the press these days, however, and that is *partly* why I asked to meet with you today.”

“I’ve been away on retreat for the last eight days, Bishop, so I’m a little out of touch. Can you fill me in?”

The tall and stately shepherd groaned, more than said, the following: “There is a house in the diocese, halfway between your monastery and these diocesan offices, in the Wilkes-Barre area, which people claim is a haunted house. “Action News” has footage of books and lamps and other things flying through the air in the house. There is a Sister who is a pastoral minister at the parish in which this house is located. Whenever she goes there things seem to get worse. The Sisters have always been on the cutting edge of life in the Church but this is pushing the envelope.

Messages of foreboding have appeared on mirrors and windows. The family who lives in the place has moved in with relatives. The media keeps calling us for some sort of response. I would like you to go there and have a look. Take that scientific and clinical brain of yours along. Use the spiritual side of you as well. These phenomena could be the result of a sociopath or they could be something parapsychological. Please see what you can come up with—just no more dead bodies or missing novices please.”

*Oh great, just what I need to liven up my boring life! I just want to be a monk.* “I will do whatever you ask, Bishop. I must admit that I don’t feel particularly competent in the area of hauntings. We didn’t have courses in that in graduate school, or in internship or residency for that matter.”

“Francis,” the leader of the diocese said, “No one *really* feels competent or comfortable

in matters such as these, but with your penchant for the bizarre, you might just be able to handle it.”

“Agreed, Your Excellency, but with Brother Matthew missing and the dead body discovered on our property, my mind is already whirling. Bishop, may I visit the house tomorrow rather than today, and may I take several professional friends along with me?”

“That will be fine, Brother Francis, I will send a release to the media, telling them that we have an expert who will be investigating the phenomena. Just so we’re clear, *you* are the *expert*. Got it?”

“I’m clear on what you’re asking, Bishop.” *What would the World Academic Society of Medical Qigong in Beijing have to say about a caper like this one?* “I will ask the Holy Spirit to guide me. I’d like to get back to the monastery now and solve a few mysteries of my own if I may.”

The Bishop smiled warmly, and invited the monk to lunch before he left. “We’re having your favorite, grilled cheese—unless somebody kidnapped the cook!”

## Chapter 20

Later that same day, Rob Williams sat on a well worn orange velour couch, surrounded by books, audio-tapes, CDs, and other materials related to spirituality and healing which people are able to purchase there as a tools to support them on their healing journeys. The scene was the waiting room of the white mobile home, which served as office and waiting area for Abbot Francis’ practice. The community had long outgrown the quarters they occupied and did everything they could to stretch their meager space—which was really quite large relative to what



people in some parts of the world have. Abbot Francis knew that someone was in the waiting room because a “beep” sounded in his office every time the door was opened and closed. This electronic convenience was tied into a burglar alarm that the doctor’s brother had installed when the vintage mobile home was first purchased.

The Chinese medicine man electronically “saved” the work he was doing on the computer, opened the door, and invited Rob into his office—a room about three times as large as the waiting room, and filled with furniture, Chinese medicinal herbs, a treatment table, Chinese meridian wall charts, computer, fax, desk, filing cabinet--not to mention several hundred books on clinical psychology and Chinese medicine. Most of the more spiritual books were stored in the monastery library, available for all to use. Francis had clearly outgrown this space as well.

Some of the doctor’s licenses and certificates were hung on the wall. The law of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania required that his license be publicly displayed, and the Federal government mandated that the credential certifying that he was a Medicare provider be hung on the wall as well. His credentials from the masters that Francis studied with were filed away as precious treasures. The graphic display of the monk’s diploma from the Institute of Chinese Herbology in Oakland, California, was a nice blend of East and West, so Francis hung that one up as well. It had taken lots of hard work to earn his credential in Chinese medicinal herbs, but it was well worth it since that educational experience wove together so much of what Francis had previously learned. It helped him to think more like a Chinese healer, it gave him the deeper blueprint, and it immersed him in Eastern thought. It was difficult to break away from the Western way of looking at health and illness but he had done so, still utilizing the power of Western medicine when that seemed appropriate. Use whatever works was his philosophy, and

respect it all as part of a greater whole.

Patient and doctor sat in matching burgundy chairs given to the community by a former patient. The abbot had already studied the discharge summary sent to him by Dr. Angel Carlo, the osteopathic physician and gastroenterologist who treated Rob on an emergency basis at Lehigh Valley Hospital in Allentown, Pennsylvania. Francis knew that seated before him was a person in intense physical, spiritual, and psychological pain; he was not yet sure which area dominated. After establishing rapport by conversing with the young man for a while, Francis asked him to lie on his back on the teal vinyl treatment table, over which the doctor could view his meridian wall charts easily.

Most of the information on the charts was securely placed in the memory bank of his head, but once in a great while, there was a fine detail of information, a small point along a particular meridian pathway perhaps, which the charts could help Francis find easily. The charts evoked fond memories of the person who gave them to him--Madam Doctor Feng Lida--a famous medical qigong doctor and researcher at the Chinese Navy Hospital where Francis had studied. A qigong master in the hills of China healed her mother many years ago when Western medicine was not able to help very much. Madam Feng Lida focused her career on medical qigong after that. Francis had dubbed her "Grandma Qi" because she was of a grandmotherly age and still bursting with life. Her brilliant smile and loving manner were probably just as healing as her Chinese medical treatments. She specialized in immunology; Francis worked more with how the psychological aspects of genuine physical disorders helped or hindered the healing process.

Abbot Francis began observing Rob clinically as soon as he opened his office door.

There was a washed-out listlessness in the patient's deportment and skin color, and his breathing was shallow. He asked Rob to open his mouth up and to stick out his tongue. Francis looked at Rob's tongue and observed how pale it was and the white coating or "moss" covering it, both of which indicated a "deficiency syndrome"--a lack of qi--the vital life force. He now took Rob's pulses--all twelve of them. The abbot held one hand near an organ and his other hand touched a finger or toe that related to that organ and the meridian channel through which the qi flowed to and from the given organ. The pulses for the lungs and large intestine were very weak indeed, suggesting deficiency syndrome once again.

"Do you sometimes have difficulty catching your breath, Rob?"

"Yes, Abbot Francis, I feel some constriction in my chest, especially when I am emotionally upset. How could you know that?"

"The twelve meridians are all paired in sets of two, the two associated organs working together to help each other, like yin and yang. The meridians that control the qi or life force of the lungs and large intestine are a related pair. If one of them is imbalanced in some way, it is probable that the other one is as well. Both lung and large intestine meridians are weak in your case. I also noticed that your skin is a little dry and scaly. It doesn't have a fresh pink look, which would be a much healthier situation for you. The skin is the tissue related to the element that the lung and large intestine are also under, namely the 'Earth element.'

"We talk about five different but related elements in Chinese medicine. These include: Fire, Earth, Air/Metal, Water, and Wood. Westerners would probably better understand these elements if they were simply called 'energies' or 'movements' since that is what they really are and what they really do. Some doctors, masters, and even ancient texts use only one name for the

Air/Metal element—calling it either ‘Air’ or ‘Metal.’ I use both names so that everyone I teach is ‘on the same page’ and does not get confused. The history behind the double name is not important for our purposes just now. You probably have enough new information swimming around in your head as it is.

“Anyway, each element, along with each of its associated organs, has a unique vibration, something like the way cardiac muscle is unique from other muscles in the body, or like the various types of human cells. The area of weakness or deficiency for you is in the Air/Metal element. Some imbalances, called ‘disorders’ for Westerners, are a product of *excess* qi in an area or organ; others are the result of too little or *deficient* qi, which is your case.”

“I’m following you fairly well, Abbot Francis, but these concepts feel somewhat foreign to me and are tying my brain up in knots a little.”

“That’s very understandable Rob. When you think about it, however, things are only ‘foreign’ because we have not been exposed to them before. Once we learn about them, they become recognizable and we become more comfortable with them,” responded the caregiver.

The abbot palpated the lower abdomen of his patient with practiced movements, using his hands as a Western doctor would use an electronic instrument to measure something about a patient, perhaps his or her brain waves. He then gently pushed in five places on and around the navel with the heel of the palm of his hand, one location for each of the five elements. The area representing Air/Metal was the weakest to his touch, sinking down under the pressure of his hand.

“That is just another diagnostic test and it confirms observations and my reading of your pulses, Rob. The lower abdominal area, which I just pressed upon with my hands, is a very

important place in the Chinese view of things. It is called the ‘Dan Tien.’ This part of the body is considered to be the center of the human person, the place where a limitless amount of qi can be stored. People who practice yoga, by the way, call this general area the ‘hara.’ Palpating the Dan Tien the way I did told me a great deal about the imbalances within you. We all have some imbalances, even if they are just the result of the waxing and waning of the five elements within and around us throughout the day and night.

“You did not even flinch when I pressed into your abdominal area, if you did recoil at palpation, it would suggest an *excess* condition rather than a deficiency condition, which can actually feel better when palpated, as if a void is being filled in.

“Enough with the lecture. I will now give you a medical qigong treatment in order to tonify or strengthen your Air/Metal element and the organs and tissue related to that element, namely the lungs, large intestine, and skin. More simply put, I will ask God to send universal qi through me and into you—something like a qi transfusion. In the process I will be using my ‘mind will’ as the Chinese call it, or intent, to cleanse the old or contaminated qi out of you so that the fresh qi can enter in easily. The Chinese sometimes call this contaminated or stagnant qi ‘evil qi.’ First I will loosen up your physical body a little so that your ‘qi body,’ as we call it, will be more open and responsive to the transition of qi which I will do after that.”

The abbot used the heels of the palms of the hands once again, this time gently to rock the arms, legs, and chest of his patient from side to side. After a little while he could feel a shift in Rob’s muscle tone, a muscular release occur throughout Rob’s being. Now that the physical body of the man on the treatment table was more relaxed, the doctor began pulling out what looked like imaginary strands of energy from the body of the patient, particularly in the area of

the lungs and large intestine. Then he moved his left hand, palm down, in clockwise circles over those same organs. This flat palm movement allowed for a diffuse “spray” of qi from doctor to patient.

As the medical qigong treatment continued, the abbot pointed the first two fingers of his left hand, since he was left-handed and this was the most natural for him, toward the area of the lungs, while circling the bottom two fingers back toward his thumb so that the fourth finger and thumb created a circle. This ancient Chinese hand position is called “sword fingers” and is used to create a more laser-like beam of qi for cutting through contamination or for transmitting qi from the doctor to the patient in a more focused way than by using a flat palm. He concentrated on moving the life force of God through and into Rob, by “cutting through the evil qi” so that fresh and healthy qi could be received by the patient and also flow more easily. He spent a few minutes over each lung and then proceeded to the area of the large intestine.

Next, with the patient in the deeply relaxed state typical during such a treatment, the doctor placed his right hand above the lungs of the young man lying on the treatment table and took the thumb of the patient in his left hand and began transmitting qi along the meridian from the lungs to the thumb. He followed this by doing the same thing with the colon and index finger, again transmitting qi through the meridian. When he *diagnosed* this patient, Francis used only the left fingers and toes to read the pulses, which is appropriate when working with a male. Women are diagnosed on the right, men on the left. In *treating* Rob, however, Francis worked with the fingers and toes of both sides of the body encouraging openness and balance in the body, mind, and spirit.

Francis gave Rob a few minutes alone in the treatment room to rest while he left to wash

his hands in the lavatory. When the doctor returned to his office, Rob was up and seated back in the chair he had occupied when the session began. The abbot asked the grieving father to stand up and showed him some moves with his hands and body meant to stimulate the flow of qi in the meridians related to the Air/Metal element, as well as throughout the entire body. The master moved his arms and legs in simple and graceful movements and asked Rob to stand next to him and practice what was demonstrated. Rob was a quick study. Doctor and patient stood next to one another and each person placed his right foot forward, and then they raised their cupped hands to the sky as if scooping water from the heavens. Finally, they moved their hands down over their heads and bodies as if bathing themselves in living water as they rocked back on to the left foot. The abbot gave Rob a paper handout with the qigong moves he had demonstrated and prescribed and checked them off for his patient on the paper.

“Visualize the color white when you practice these qigong movements, if you would Rob. Each element has a specific color associated with it. The color is a type of vibration that is believed to enhance the particular element needing tonification or strengthening. The color white is associated with the Air/Metal element. You can meditate on the color white as well. Just sit and think of a beautiful white light washing over you, especially in the area of your lungs and colon, and let it imaginatively saturate your skin as well. Francis next prescribed some Chinese medicinal herbal formulas, the first of which was called *Chen Li Pills* and were made up of milkvetch root, relative root, angelica (*tangkuie*) root, white peony root, and costus root.

“Please take one capful, sixty-five pills, three times a day Rob.”

“Wow, Abbot Francis, that sounds like a lot of medicine.”

“The pills are purposely made small, like little honey-baked bee-bees. That way the herbs

in them can be metabolized better. Take them on an empty stomach when possible, so that they are not fighting with what you eat for entrance into your system, okay? And this medicine is best taken with warm water. The Chinese believe that cold liquids are not good for digestion.”

“You’re the doctor, Doctor. I think I recognize the word ‘*tangkuie*.’ Don’t women take that to give them stamina or something?”

“That’s right, Rob, but that’s not the only use, or spelling, for *tangkuie*. The herb you are speaking about is what we called a ‘hematonic,’ that is, it strengthens the blood. Thus, it is very helpful for women in relationship to their monthly cycles, but men can take it as well. The *Chen Li Pills* that I have prescribed for you have it in because *tangkuie* will cooperate with other herbs in that formula in order to balance and strengthen you, especially in the intestinal area. Chinese medicinal herbs are almost never used individually. They are given in formulas created to bring balance to whatever might be, for example, too wet or too dry, too hot or too cold. It’s more complicated than that but I think you get the idea. More directly, the *Chen Li Pills* are a formula used to help with your irritable bowel syndrome.

“You may take this little red box of ‘Curing Pills’ with you also. In it you will find ten small vials, each individually boxed. Each vial contains seventy little pills. You can take a vial before, or with, any meal that you think might cause you some digestive difficulty, for example, when you first start eating solid food again. Also, if you feel your stomach becoming upset, take a vial of Curing Pills. Some companies are now dropping the ‘r’ from the word ‘curing’ and replacing it with an ‘l’ because they don’t want to be out of compliance with American regulations by labeling something as *curing*. ‘Culing,’ with the ‘l’ in place of the ‘r’ turns the word into nonsense on one level, yet most Chinese people or folks astute in Chinese medicine



know exactly what the package contains just by looking at that famous red cardboard box.”

“Hey, there’s quite a long and interesting list of ingredients here on the paper insert. I see why these things are called ‘formulas.’ Among other things Curing Pills contain *tangkuie*, which is in the *Chen Li* Pills also, magnolia bark, chrysanthemum flower, green tangerine peel, and peppermint. Looks like I’m getting a double dose of that hematonic you spoke of.”

“That’s right, Rob. There is a method to my madness. Everything in Chinese medicine is about patters and formulas—it all works together—and the five elements are a type of blue print creating a whole.”

“Speaking of the five elements, each element or energy has a psychological component to it. The Earth element, the one that is low in you, is related to sorrow. Too much sorrow and an imbalance can be created. Sorrow is a normal response to a loss, but when it remains too long the imbalance can become chronic and life can become very difficult indeed. Own your sorrow, Rob, please stop turning it into anger. Men are socialized to think that anger is a more acceptable emotion than sorrow, but all of the emotions have their places.”

“That sounds consistent with what Dr. Cooper is saying, Abbot Francis. I’ll do my very best to be honest with myself. I suppose we need wholeness *within* ourselves, as well as *among* people,” responded the patient.

Francis had never known a world without death in it. The conversation shifted to deeper and more psychological realms, and the doctor-patient, brother-brother, father-son pair (Rob was not sure what their relationship was at this point.) philosophized about how painful it is not to have the people we love in our lives, in this case Rob’s deceased little child, and possibly even Rob’s wife if they didn’t get their marital act together soon.

With all the force of the thunder of the drums that called the Buddhist monastic community on Lantau Island to prayer at three-thirty a.m., the “something” which had been tugging at the back of Francis’ mind finally came to consciousness. He had to act quickly.

Immediately after Rob made his next appointment and left the office, Francis rummaged through his trash can. *That’s right, I emptied it.* He rushed over to the main house and down into the garage. There stood four Rubbermaid trash containers. *Now which one did I put my trash in?*

It felt like a TV game show: trash can number one, number two, or number three, or number four? *I just don’t remember. I suppose I’ll just start with trashcan number one and keep on moving.*

Before long word had spread about the abbot’s “treasure hunt” and other community members helped him by rooting through the remaining three trash cans. They were looking for the anonymous note that Abbot Francis had received in the mail, and almost immediately threw away, the night before. Brother Benedict was the winner: “Here it is, here it is! What do I win?”

“Wonderful! Let’s see if we can find the envelope.”

## Chapter 21

Meditation was very difficult the next morning after the Office of Vigils. Everyone in the community seemed to be somewhat distracted and on edge. All were keeping the Grand Silence but still each knew that the rest of the community members were restless. The events of the past week were just beginning to fit together and the collective mind of the community was working

overtime.

The mystery team reconvened after breakfast in the monastery library. Detective Gold, Dr. Chantal Fleur, Hester Von Kiel, and the abbot studied the anonymous letter encased in a plastic bag. Hester took one look at the scrawled message, slid right off of her chair in a faint that took her down to the floor with a loud thud. *Thank you Jesus for carpet!*

“Good heavens, Hester, I thought you were *lightening up*,” mumbled the abbot. What Francis seemed to dismiss as a momentary emotional display, David saw as very important. When the dramatics were over, Dave very quietly asked Hester if the note held any special significance for her.

One approach to psychotherapy is called “Gestalt” therapy, named after the German word for pattern. In this approach to psychological healing, the doctor encourages the patient to trigger an old pattern or context in which a certain attitude or emotion was learned so that he or she can change it, or “unlearn it” by re-visiting the context of the original learning. Sometimes this may take the form of talking to an empty chair as if there were a person in it. This imaginary person, for example, might be someone the patient is trying to make friends with, or get over a feeling about. The patient then moves to the empty chair and talks as if he or she were that imaginary person responding back to the patient. The emotional response to this kind of therapy is very powerful and can trigger a sudden “gestalt” or pattern in the feelings in the patient. At that moment of blinding insight, everything comes together and an emotional shift can occur in the psyche of the person being treated.

Various pieces of the present adventures in Hester’s life, for example the disappearance of Brother Matthew, her discovery of the body of Christi Simko on the hill behind the monastery

grounds, her sleuthing around and discovering Brother Matthew's book and the empty Cheez Twists bag, and the anonymous note, all coalesced together into a blinding gestalt which was too overwhelming for Hester to tolerate so suddenly. Thus, she fainted. It was the note that triggered the pieces into a unified and understandable pattern or gestalt.

Hester righted herself, and tried to straighten out her short graying hair a little. Once she thought that she looked proper enough, but not *too* proper for the new Hester, she explained: "The person who wrote that note is my old boyfriend; I am convinced of it. I'd recognize that writing anywhere. He wanted to marry me. I didn't marry him because he had such an undisciplined brain. He used to say that he was dumb, but that was just an excuse not to think things through thoroughly. No one is dumb; we all have different gifts. He was more interested in himself than in avoiding the disruptions that his lack of thinking and mental discipline would produce.

"The words of the Buddha, found in the book containing his saying called the *Dhammapada*, sum Jeff and this whole situation up perfectly: "Just as rain breaks through an ill-thatched house, so passion penetrates an undeveloped mind."

"I knew that," whispered Dave under his breath as he rolled his prominent brown eyes upward and then visually connected with Francis and Chantal.

"Jeff loved Cheez Twists. I couldn't *consciously* bring myself to think of him as a kidnapper but I grabbed that empty Cheez Twists bag as evidence just as soon as I saw it. Jeff would never harm anyone but would probably not think through a caper like this, seeing it more as a game than as a crime. He is somehow behind the disappearance of Brother Matthew. His lazy, illogical mind, probably decided that Brother Matthew and I were not available for him and

Christi so he kidnapped Brother Matthew prior to the day on which our novice was to take his monastic vows.”

Hester read the note aloud to the group: “If we can’t have them, neither can you.”

“See how the writer uses the pseudo-word ‘yous’ for the plural of ‘you?’ People from Philadelphia do that a lot, and Jeff is originally from there. It has nothing to do with intelligence; it is simply a local custom. Detective Gold shifted his body, which was now less overweight due to the taxing month he had just been through, and thanks also to his healthier lifestyle. “Do you think he’s capable of murder?”

“Not in the least. Jeff is essentially a kind man—mentally lazy, but kind.”

## Chapter 22

The mystery team arrived at Jeff’s modest home in the Poconos about twenty minutes after Hester abreacted, as only Hester could. No one was home. Jeff had his own house painting business and rattled around in an old van to do his work. Maybe he was at work now. He could be anywhere if that were the case.

Chantal Fleur, always the forensic psychologist, had a sharp eye for detail. “Did you say that Jeff has a beat-up old van, Hester?”

“Yes, I did, Doctor F.”

“Well, there’s one right over there,” announced the eagle eye as she pointed toward the back tree line of the property. Sure enough, about three hundred yards away, parked in front of a dilapidated old farmhouse, sat Jeff’s van. The four friends impulsively took off across the field, running at top speed. David Gold reined them in when they got closer to the house, asking them

to be quiet and careful. He drew his gun, stood aside the door and banged on it. “Open up, police. Open up *now*.”

The door flew open. “Okay, okay. I don’t want any trouble.” A shower of golden Cheez Twists flew out of his mouth as he spoke. Once the detective was certain that Jeff did not have a weapon, the team entered the house.

Hester grabbed Jeff by the shoulders and shook him. The new Hester was very strong. “Where’s Brother Matthew? I know you have him.”

“I’m right here. Not to worry. Everything is fine now,” shouted the novice from the next room as he opened the creaking door to his holding cell. He walked into the parlor, completely free of his chains, grateful and relieved—and a few pounds lighter.

Jeff stared at him in amazement. “How did you get out of the shackles I had locked around your ankles?”

“You left the keys in there when you locked me up. I could have escaped earlier but I needed to understand what you were up to. I thought it would help all of us. I’m so sorry to have upset everyone. It appeared to be the only way I could figure out what you were up to and protect everyone involved.”

On the way to the Simko’s, they explained to Brother Matthew that his ex-fiancée was now dead. Matthew was subdued, trying to take in the maze of events that in no way even began to form a gestalt or pattern for him yet, thus healing would take a while yet.

Mr. and Mrs. Simko were far from happy to have their mourning invaded by the mystery team plus two. Mutt was especially disturbed to see Jeff and Brother Matthew. Tender and confused emotions hovered over and around the entire group.

“I’ll save you all a lot of trouble,” confessed Mutt Simko. “It was my stupid idea to kidnap Matthew. He dumped my daughter and I didn’t like it. She was waiting for him to come to his senses and leave the monastery. She even wore the diamond engagement ring he gave her. I followed her a few times. Sometimes she would walk over to the monastery and walk around the acreage above and behind the monastery buildings. That must have been what she was doing when she got shot.

“Trooper Jonas was just here. He said that they are of the opinion that Christi’s death was accidental, probably the result of a hunter’s stray bullet. The State Police believe that whoever the hunter was, the person panicked and covered up his or her act by trying to bury our Christi.

“A broken engagement is far less important than a death. I see now the stupidity of my anger and revenge. It only made matters worse. I vow *not* to take revenge on the death of my daughter. I know it will not help.”

Mutt and Jeff left the Simko home with Detective Gold at the wheel. They would be residing in the jail in Stroudsburg until the authorities decided their fate. Mutt would be permitted to attend the funeral of his daughter.

Mrs. Simko drove Francis, Chantal, Hester and Matthew back to the monastery. As painful as it would be, she needed to look at the site where her daughter had been so hastily buried. She would also spend a long time in the oratory wrestling with God. The vigil for Christi and Matthew had ended. A lifetime of adjustment would follow.

## Chapter 23

The community was apprised of recent developments by the abbot. Their prayerful support had helped him through everything and he thanked them. Action and contemplation work hand in hand. In this situation, they were the contemplation, he was the action, but one is always within the other. Francis had one more task to complete--assessing the situation of the so-called haunted house. This time, if there were any dead bodies or other newsworthy items found, it would be because *the Bishop asked him* to go there and not in any way the abbot's own doing. Ghosts were not Francis' favorite topic, but he believed that he had come in contact with a few during the span of his fifty-some years.

*I think the Bishop wants me to go there as a clinical psychologist, just to diagnose that everyone connected with this situation is crazy. That would be painting with a rather broad brush, and certainly an improper way to diagnose anyone or anything.*

It was Saturday morning and the members of the mystery team, plus Brother Matthew, had plenty of other things to do with their time, but no one could resist a trip to a haunted house. The abbot, for reasons he had not shared, wanted his novice with the team today.

Armed with prayerful hearts and a bottle of holy water, Francis, Dave, Chantal, Hester, and Matthew headed toward Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. They entered the home that they had been directed to by the Bishop's office, a duplex, or as the locals would call it, "a double." December wind slammed the door behind them and everyone jumped in unison. Francis was convinced that if they were to make contact with any spirits which might be residing there, they would need to calm themselves down and open up their minds and psyches. In order to achieve this, the novice group of ghost busters sat in the living room and prayed. They asked the spirit of God to guide them and asked God for protection from evil. Francis then suggested that the group



use the mantra *Om shanti, shanti, shanti*. This is an ancient Sanskrit phrase for praying to the God of peace.

The group decided to stay together as they moved through the house, inspecting it room by room. They crept from the living room into the dining room, and were greeted there by a mirror falling off the wall and crashing on the floor into a million little glittering shards. Upon recovering from that, the dining room door slammed closed by itself.

“We can do this, gang,” Francis said. He wasn’t sure if he was speaking for the benefit of the group or to bolster his own courage. *Where is the Wizard of Oz when you needed him?*

The kitchen was directly behind the dining room and the spirit stalkers crowded into it. Wind howled all around the building. “Everything seems fine in here,” Chantal whispered but not sounding very convincing. By way of negating her comment, the oven door flew open and banged her behind both of her knees, knocking her to the creaky old floor. Her three colleagues picked up the feisty forensic psychologist and were assured in response that she was in no way harmed, although she was more than a little shaken.

*It would be nice if one of us knew what he or she was doing* thought Hester. She had great respect for the people she was with but this was not an everyday occurrence for any of them. She suggested that they look around upstairs to get the investigation over with and then get out. Everyone was in agreement.

The steps creaked loudly as the team members made their way to the upper level. Three bedrooms and a bath needed to be inspected. They entered the front bedroom, the largest room of the three. Once again, everything seemed fine at first. They were about to move to the next room when a large sheet of plaster, like a jagged three foot in diameter snowflake, fell from the

ceiling immediately in front of David Gold, and landed at his feet. He jumped back, change and keys jingling in his pockets. Another chunk hit Hester in the head and she responded with a loud: “Hey, watch it.”

They didn’t need to discuss it; they just moved to the middle bedroom.

Nothing unusual occurred while they were in the middle bedroom, but windows all around them rattled and doors from other parts of the house banged open and shut. The courageous parapsychologists moved into the little bathroom. Two of the claw feet on the old bathtub had broken off and the tub was tilted toward its front end. The water dripping from the faucet in the sink sounded deafening as the four team members plus one held their breath, ready to run.

They reached the back room. The faded and peeling floral wallpaper hinted of happier days in the dwelling. Detective Gold absentmindedly opened the door to the shallow old-fashioned closet in the side wall. He was about to close it when he noticed that the back panel of the closet was vibrating with the wind. Upon closer inspection, the detective saw that there were hinges on the back panel and that it was a door which probably went through to the house adjacent to this one, the other “double.”

Francis was ready to move on. “Let’s go, gang. I think we’ve done enough for now.” The group creaked down the stairs again and everyone was ready to leave when Brother Matthew reminded them that they had not checked out the basement. David Gold was about to make the same observation. Determined to get this over with, the researchers turned the light on in the basement and went down. It was an old dirt floor upon which their feet landed. The air was dank and musty and the basement echoed with booms and cracks. They all ran upstairs.

The others thought Brother Matthew had seen one too many sci-fi movies when he asked the group to sit for a few moments in the living room, the place where they had begun their investigation. Brother Matthew said he felt the presence of a benevolent spirit and wanted to see if he could receive a message. The others reluctantly agreed and everyone sat down and began praying quietly, mostly to get the visit over with.

Within moments a feeling of peace pervaded all of them and the entire room as well. Matthew listened with his heart, rather than with his ears. A faint smile appeared on his face. The others looked at him expectantly. After a long period of blissful silence, the novice told them that he *heard* nothing, but that he had a strong sense of Christi's presence with them. She seemed to be communicating that she wanted him to know that she was fine and that she held no ill will toward Matthew because he broke their engagement.

Francis told the group that he had many times heard such visitation stories from people who had recently lost loved ones. Francis had, in fact, experienced this himself on occasion. He believed that Christi chose the haunted house to communicate with Matthew because the group support was there for her visit then, and because all of his friends were open to the Spirit in a very special way at that time.

## Chapter 23

Shortly after Christmas, the front page of the *Pocono Record* newspaper had an article about the haunted house in Wilkes-Barre. The Bishop of Scranton said that the strange occurrences in the house were the result of mine subsidence under the structure and that engineers were investigating the entire area due to danger of possible collapse. The mysterious messages, which appeared on mirrors and windows, were the doing of the next-door neighbor, a

man given to practical jokes, who wanted to buy the house at an inexpensive price and thus double his living quarters. The neighbor entered and exited the house through a panel in the back bedroom closet. Though the Bishop knew about it, the article made no mention of the visit Christi paid to the group.

The next month, on January twenty-fourth, the Solemnity of Saint Francis de Sales, Brother Matthew made his Simple Profession. While the Church requires temporary vows at first, to be renewed annually for three to nine years, in his heart Brother Matthew committed himself to Christ and the monastic life forever. This is the inner or spiritual requirement for admission to simple profession. Thus, both human frailty and spiritual strength are taken into account when a novice is preparing for his or her first vows.

The little oratory had about twenty-five guests squeezed into its warm embrace. The small square altar table was covered in a bright white altar cloth, a basket of white daisies sat on the floor in front of the altar. Smaller matching baskets of wildflowers rested on the floor beneath the pedestals on which rested the open book of the Scriptures on one side of the oratory, and the tabernacle containing the Eucharist on the other side. Two small votive candles in clear glass holders flickered on the altar of sacrifice, matching the fire and light in the one to be professed.

In the heart of the Liturgy, after the opening hymn, scripture readings, and a stirring homily preached by a married deacon and neighbor to the monastery about the similarity of the deep commitment necessary in marriage, family, and in monastic life, Abbot Francis celebrated the actual ceremony of monastic profession.

\* \* \* \* \*

Abbot Francis: “My dear Brother Matthew, by water and the Holy Spirit you have already been consecrated to God’s service. Are you resolved publicly to unite yourself more closely to God by the new bond of monastic profession?”

Brother Matthew: “I am so resolved.”

Abbot Francis: “In your desire to follow Christ perfectly, are you resolved to live in Conversion of Life, Stability, and Obedience, which includes celibate love and a poverty of spirit manifested by simplicity of life?”

Brother Matthew: “I am, with the help of God’s grace.”

Abbot Francis: “May our all-loving God grant you the grace to fulfill what you resolve to do.”

All responded: “Amen, so be it!”

Abbot Francis: “Let us Pray: Lord, look upon this servant of yours who is resolved to dedicate his life to you by making profession of the evangelical counsels in the monastic tradition and in the presence of your Church gathered here today. Mercifully grant that his manner of life may bring glory to your name and further our loving plan in our world. We ask this in Jesus’ name.”

All responded: “Amen.”

With a few of his bruises still moving through a spectrum of colors on the way to healing, the young monk stood up in the center of the oratory. He lifted the profession book, in which he

had earlier written out his vows, from the altar on which it rested. Surrounded by family and friends, the novice monk pronounced the vow formula by memory with his whole heart.

“Jesus, my Savior and my God, I, Brother Matthew Orloski, vow for one year,” *for the rest of my life* “with all my heart, Conversion of Life, Obedience, and Stability, according to the Rule of the Salesian Monastic Community, in the service of your Church.

“I offer and consecrate to you, in honor of the Virgin Mary your Mother, my body, my soul, and my life, and do this in your presence Brother Francis de Sales O’Neill, abbot of the Salesian Monastery, Brodheadsville, Pennsylvania.

“Receive me, eternal Creator, in your mercy, so that through the merits of your beloved Son, my Redeemer, I may carry continuously the yoke and burden of your service and surrender myself forever, and completely, to your infinite love.

“I choose Jesus, my Lord and my God, as my only love, asking Mary, his holy Mother, to take me under her maternal protection.

“I choose the Salesian Monastic Community, our holy father Saint Francis de Sales, our holy mother Saint Jane Frances de Chantal, and all our other patrons, protectors, and founders, as my guides along the path to holiness.

“Glory to you, Source of all Being, Eternal Word and Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now and will be forever. Amen.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The newly professed monk returned the profession book to its place on the altar, symbolic of Matthew's own self-oblation, and signed and dated the vow formula. The vows were then counter-signed by the abbot and two witnesses, namely Hester Von Kiel and Helena Simko.

Brother Matthew then raised his dark blue cowl up over his head and prostrated himself face down on the oratory floor. The monastic community, relatives, and guests sang the Litany of the Saints over him, invoking all of the Saints in heaven to intercede to God for support and joy during his life ahead in a world not very supportive of any type of life-long commitment, be it marriage, single life, monastic / religious life, or the clergy.

Mrs. Simko, as a gesture of healing and reconciliation after her daughter's case was concluded, had asked David Gold to accept Christi's diamond engagement ring which her deceased daughter had received from Matthew before he entered monastic life. Mrs. Simko's plot came to fruition when David explained where it came from, and then slipped it on Chantal's finger after the profession ceremony as he asked her to marry him. Mrs. Simko, a wise wife and mother, encouraged love wherever she saw it and perhaps saw something of Christi and Matthew in David and Chantal.

Death and resurrection, suffering and healing, yin and yang--all of this is the stuff of life in every culture.

Mutt and Jeff were read the riot act by the police, after having performed like one themselves. No formal charges were pressed against the rioters, which filled them with gratitude and relief. Perhaps they had both taken another step along the long road to maturity.

Abbot Francis spent the next few days playing "catch up" with his e-mail, "snail mail," and phone messages. He accomplished a few things on his "to do" list, including visiting

someone in a locked ward of the state hospital where the patient / prisoner had been court mandated for treatment. Having kept vigil in all these ways by staying open to the unfolding mystery of life, the abbot needed another retreat!

*Shabbat shalom*



## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Fleming, D. L. (1978). *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius: A Literal Translation and a Contemporary Reading*. St. Louis, MO: The Institute of Jesuit Sources. [Reprinted with permission.]

<sup>2</sup>Wu, J. C. H. (Trans.). (1990). *Tao The Ching* (Lao Tzu). Copyright 1961 by St. John's University Press, NY. Reprinted by arrangement with Shambhala Publications, Inc., Boston, MA, [www.shambhala.com](http://www.shambhala.com).

<sup>3</sup>(1977 / 5737). *Gates of the House: The New Union Home Prayerbook*. New York, NY: Central Conference of American Rabbis. [Reprinted with permission.]