

## **BEING A MONK**

Recently my wife and I visited the Trappist Monastery of the Holy Spirit in Conyers, Georgia, about thirty-five miles east of Atlanta. It is quite a tourist friendly place. They have a very large Christian gift store, a gardening shop, a wonderful museum, a dining facility, a retreat center, walking paths and of course an inspiring chapel.

The museum captured our full attention. It displays the history of monasticism beginning with eastern religion monasteries several thousand years before Christ and ending with contemporary conferences attended by monks of many different spiritual traditions.

We learned that all monasteries are designed for contemplation and peaceful meditation, with the ultimate goal of connecting with God. St. Augustine said it so succinctly, "Lord, you have made us for yourself. Our souls will never rest until they rest in thee."

Western Christian monasticism has evolved from solitary, hermitage life into vibrant, productive communities, which balance time together with time alone. The guiding five principles of modern monastic life are work, community, prayer, solitude and silence. Let's explore these five principles to see how we might apply them to ourselves.

### **WORK**

We commonly view work as a means of earning money to provide for our material needs. The monks view work as serving one another. This highlights our inter-dependency, our inter-connectedness. Labor is a big part of being human. We wash clothes; garden; drive a car; have a job; open a door.

The challenge is to either find work that is intrinsically rewarding or to make it so by our attitude. When we sweep the floor or assemble a mechanical object, whatever we do, when we do it with a positive, purposeful attitude, the work becomes fulfilling and meaningful.

My older brother playfully accuses me of never working a day in my life. I joyfully agree with him because my work has consistently been inherently satisfying.

The monks also believe in not being dependent upon others for their livelihood so they support themselves by creating stain glass windows; providing natural burial spaces; and making biscotti, fudge and fruitcake. All of it is of the highest quality.

### **COMMUNITY**

Most of us realize we are social beings. We are made for relationship. Unfortunately, our preeminent national value is individualism. Our culture of cars,

air conditioning, movies, smart phones, Internet, etc., support our being alone (in a world falling apart!). Remember Bowling Alone by Robert D. Putnam?

Remember The Blue Zones: 9 Lessons for Living Longer from the People Who've Lived the Longest by Dan Buettner? Those who live longer tend to also live well because they have strong, daily experiences of family and community. The monks realize that Fanny Brice had it right, that "people need people." How easily we isolate ourselves from one another.

## **PRAYER**

The monks pray together seven times each day as well as individually. The Moslems pray and bow toward Mecca five times a day. Some people consciously pray constantly. Some people view each moment of each day as a prayer.

However, we view prayer, regardless of whether we pray or not, at some level of awareness, we all possess a yearning for a meaningful life. Viktor Frankl eloquently expressed this in his classic book, Man's Search for Meaning.

The monks probably have one large advantage over us. Their daily schedule has allotted times for prayer, reflection and meditation. For us, we have to discipline ourselves to carve out time for prayer.

## **SOLITUDE**

Solitude entails being alone but without being lonely. I tell my meditation mentees that they need not ever fear being alone, because they can always stop and take the time to connect with themselves and with God present within them.

We seem now to fear solitude. We are umbilically connected to our electronic gadgets. Even when we are with others, we cannot stop ourselves from checking our phones for texts, voicemail and email. We don't mean to be rude; we're just hopelessly addicted.

## **SILENCE**

Silence and solitude are closely connected. To varying degrees, we all have a need to get away from "it all." We need a respite. Silence enriches our solitude as we take the time to connect and be okay with ourselves. Try riding in your car without music or news or recorded books. You might find it refreshing.

My wife believes "the sweetest sound of all is the sound of silence." As we age, that belief seems increasingly valid. Someone also said, "the language of God is silence." Sometimes there is wisdom in "observing without judging, experiencing without thinking."

## **CONCLUSION**

Some believe that the "monk-life" can only be achieved by monks. I believe there is something of the monk in everyone. We can make our lives wholly devoted to contemplation – a life of work, community, prayer, solitude and silence. Monks

don't have a special edge on the God-market. We are all equally entitled. And it's found everywhere: at work, at home, in our cars, restaurants, beaches, airports and church, mosque or temple.

*Dr. Jim David is a practicing psychotherapist in Silver Spring, MD, who adheres to positivity in all areas of life. Visit his website at [www.askdrdavidnow.com](http://www.askdrdavidnow.com) or email at [james519@comcast.net](mailto:james519@comcast.net).*