

CONVERSations

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Conversations
PO Box 292378 ♦ Kettering, OH ♦ 45429
800-607-4410
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Comments & Questions:

Conversations ♦ McCarty Building
2055 Mount Paran Road ♦ Atlanta, Georgia ♦ 30327
800-607-4410
conversations@richmont.edu

Gift of Making Space



Running home to Mom and Dad . . . Returning to the nest . . . In a culture in which renting rooms is no longer widespread, and relationships lack stability, adult kids are returning home to live with their parents, who have become their economic safety net. But when Mom and Dad are deceased or unsafe as living companions or unwilling to have those kids come home, homelessness abounds.

Finding sanctuary—a place to run off to—is universally crucial, and for much of Christendom, Benedictine houses offered safe places to sleep off the weariness of traveling dreary and dangerous roads. Nearly every monastic order invited those who wished to seek God to find sanctuary from the chaos of the world, even if only for a while.

Many of us look for such sanctuary first in books. Such luminaries as Bernard of Clairvaux, the primary builder of the Cistercian monastic order, and Teresa of Avila, who reformed her own order (*barefoot Carmelites*), invite us to love God not just for what God can do for us, but for God's own self¹—a radical idea in a world that encourages us to self-improve our way to heaven. Teresa lets us know we aren't crazy if we sense an inner castle-like presence of God or if we experience the "gnats" of wandering thoughts,² as she calls them.

My first engagement with a real-life monastic setting was tenuous. Trusting Bernard and Teresa, I ran off to monthly day-retreats with the holy nuns. I made a production out of it. *Now hear this*, I said to myself: *I'm forsaking productivity and leaving my self-employed business for a whole day to retreat.* Wasn't I holy? Wasn't I excep-

tional? Hadn't God better show up and do something stunning? The pressure was on.

The speakers at these retreats, however, seemed to say *nothing* rather eloquently and then sent us out on the beautiful grounds to be quiet. When I was upset by all this nonproductivity or by life in general, I ferociously circled the entire enclave over and over. None of the nuns I passed were as agitated as I was. What did they know that I didn't? Gradually I found myself sitting on a bench looking down into a creek nestled in a ravine and then, month after month, climbing down into that creek bed to sit on a large rock. There I got profound messages from God, such as, *I'm with you; I see you; I love you.*

It got so I could not sit through more than twenty minutes of the opening talk before I slipped out to the creek bed for those much-needed messages. I no longer cared about the topic; I had an appointment at the creek. Those early days set me up for radical things, such as a regular Sabbath and then three-day retreats, an eight-day retreat, and a thirty-day retreat.

At that point, people thought I was nuts. "You're going where? For how long? There's no phone?" During the first few hours of these retreats, I kicked myself, thinking, *Why am I wasting my time?* But after a few more hours, I kicked myself, thinking, *Why didn't I come sooner?*

The courageous gift of the monastery *to me* is permission to run away. It's not an escape, as so many people believe, because we bring everybody else with us in our heads, but we have enough distance from the chaos to quiet them. It's "soul school," a space in which

God can speak to us about what it would look like to love the difficult people in our lives and how the neediness of our spirits drives us to do foolish things. It's a refuge where we know we are loved by God even when we accomplish nothing.

Now I'm hopeless. I no longer have to fight myself to keep a Sabbath. I'm taken captive by it, and without it I can't breathe. Why? I've come home. At the monastery I learned to be at home with God, to make God my home, to invite God to be at home in me all the time, to recognize that God already was at home in me, but I wasn't still enough to sense it. The gift of the monastery is God's own self and permission to hang out with this God.

Jan Johnson

Endnotes

¹ Bernard of Clairvaux, "On Loving God," *Selected Works*. Translated by G. R. Evans. Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1987, 192-197.

² *Reginald Somerset Ward: His Life and Letters*. Edited by Bishop E. R. Morgan. London: A. R. Mowbray & Co., Limited, 1963, 140.