

“Rachel Srubas deftly juxtaposes pithy words of wisdom from the Desert Fathers with intensely personal reflections on both ordinary and colorful people and events in her own life. Her painfully honest, practical and lyrical, poignant and occasionally funny anecdotes, touch the heart while delighting the mind of anyone who appreciates skillfully chosen words. Each of the forty essays is a model and a tacit appeal for the reader’s own personal reflection.”

Sr. Lenora Black, OSB
Editor of *Spirit & Life* magazine

“I admire the warmth and candor with which Rachel writes about spiritual life in the everyday world. The book would make a fine, reassuring companion on a Lenten journey or on any other 40-day sojourn in the ‘desert’ of Christian contemplation of the Holy.”

Nancy Mairs
Writer
Tucson, Arizona

“The title of Barbara Brown Taylor’s recent book, *Leaving Church*, has become an icon of sorts for people who are finding the difficulties and discouragements of church life a burden. Rachel Srubas offers a refreshingly new (yet old) response to such difficulties and discouragements. Drawing on St. Benedict and his mentors, the desert fathers and mothers, Srubas offers a model for how to pay attention to our own responses, using Scripture, prayer, and ancient wisdom to learn practical virtues in the daily living of our lives, especially in the uncomfortable moments. Like Benedict himself, Srubas has learned to be at home with human weakness, even as she delights in ‘the Gospel’s outlandish promises and demands, and its huge hope.’ *City of Prayer* is a wonderful and down-to-earth mystic’s recipe for spiritual growth!”

Norvene Vest
Spiritual Director and Author

“*City of Prayer* is a delightful conversation between the wise and colorful early desert ascetics and a contemporary seeker. Rachel is down-to-earth (the monastic understanding of humility) and real. Anyone who does not understand these ancient witty wisdom teachings, who fails to see their own journey in these early ‘sayings’ and ‘stories’ will come to recognize the echo of their story in Rachel’s wonderful insights. Ultimately Rachel reminds us that all of our life, every encounter and struggle and gift encounter is prayer. This is all that the ascetics asked their followers to recognize. *Deo Gratias.*”

Laura Swan, OSB

Author of *The Benedictine Tradition* and *The Forgotten Desert Mothers*

“In this superbly written book Rachel Srubas welcomes the desert Christians into the swirl of twenty-first century life instead of offering readers another set of historical lectures on fourth-century desert monasticism. Her creative retrieval of a vibrant moment in Christianity’s past helps us grasp why wisdom won long ago matters so much to the vitality of our own contemporary lives of faith.”

Donald Ottenhoff

Executive Director

Collegetown Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research

“These forty reflections seamlessly blend eloquent prose and poetry, suffering and humor with a good measure of enlightening, reader-friendly scholarship. Taking as their inspiration passages from fourth-century desert monks—mothers *and* fathers—they illuminate and deepen what it means to lead a fully aware, engaged life built on a foundation of contemplation and meditation. They demonstrate for us the ways in which the past is our present, making a whole woven tapestry of our lives and those of our teachers and forebears.”

Fenton Johnson

Author of *Keeping Faith: A Skeptic’s Journey among Christian and Buddhist Monks*

City of Prayer

Forty Days with Desert Christians

Rachel M. Srubas



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*With love for my mother and father,
Alice Tarpinian Srubas and John Richard Srubas*

*and for Jean Carol Bronson,
who is a Desert Mother to many.*

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Actual persons powerfully shaped my writing of this work. In some cases, in order to protect individuals' privacy, I have altered names and details or have composed composite characters representing my perception and experience of multiple persons. Pastoral ethics mandate that, prior to publication, a pastor who is also an author obtain the permission of any parishioners whose stories are to appear in a book. I have gratefully obtained such permissions from parishioners, and from other family members, friends, and associates, all of whom have blessed me and my writing with their generous, unhesitating encouragement.

Rachel M. Srubas

Introduction

Christianity Is a Desert Religion

Discovering the Desert

Two summers into our marriage, my husband Ken and I drove from Chicago to Colorado, to camp in the Rocky Mountains. Initially we pitched our tent at such a high elevation that we panted for lack of oxygen and woke up to snow. So we drove some distance down the mountain and found, at the end of a dirt road, a campsite called The Commissary. A cold, stony creek splashed past it and sunlight made its way through the pines—when rain wasn't falling, which it did with regularity. This made dry firewood hard to find. Our days in the Rockies were made just that—rocky—by the clean, high, and changeable weather. One morning, in the rainwater that had collected in one of our cooking pots, we discovered that a mouse had drowned. That did it. Now we weren't merely out of our urban element, we were dangerous to other living beings.

Before the rains could return and muck up Commissary Road, making it impassable, we shoved our gear into our aging Toyota and rolled out of there. Some miles outside of Gunnison we came upon a house with a hand-lettered sign in front advertising two-dollar hot showers, cold drinks, and candy bars. I felt a little nervous about the taciturn cowboy minding the store, but Ken kept his eye on him. The shower stall was

cramped and the water pressure minimal, but it was enough to get me clean.

It's been said that America does its best thinking in the shower. I washed my hair and thought about Interstate 25. The highway atlas showed it running right out of Colorado, southward to New Mexico. Neither Ken nor I had ever been there, but I liked the "New" part of its name. It sounded promising. And "Mexico"—that sounded sunny and dry.

Hours later, soon after we had crossed state lines, the warm, arid wind rushing in through the car windows pulled the waves out of my hair. The terrain went scrubby and the sky enormous, with rows of dollop-clouds receding into the distance, reminding me of a painting I'd seen at the Art Institute of Chicago. By the next afternoon we had turned onto a highway that wound among yellow mesas bigger than the buildings that flanked Michigan Avenue back home. We stopped for a picnic of canned deviled ham spread on "desert toast," which is what our bread became after seconds of exposure to the warm, waterless breezes.

We set up camp in northern New Mexico and learned some essentials. For instance, the waitress at the Spic & Span Diner was talking about chile—marvelous piquant sauce made from peppers—when she asked you, "red or green?" And the rains still rolled in around four o'clock every afternoon, but plunging through the desert air changed them qualitatively. By the time the drops hit the earth you appreciated the way they pummeled the sagebrush until its scent broke open. Living things needed water, which was scarce and holy here and not to be complained about. We would sit in our car, buffered by the air and rubber of its tires, and watch lightning pulse and crack on the horizon. We thought about the desert's snakes and lizards waiting out the storm in their underground dwellings.

Pretty soon the rain would stop, the sandy soil and the parched air had sucked away all water, and in the twilight a few bats would appear overhead, darting after insects. The sky would darken, dissolving the mountains' silhouettes, and

stars would emerge in far greater numbers than we city dwellers had realized existed. A few stars even shot across heaven. Awestruck, we lay on our backs on the Toyota's warm hood, watching the dynamic night while bugs the bats hadn't managed to catch buzzed and feasted on our ankles.

For the next several summers Ken and I made pilgrimage to the high desert of Northern New Mexico, which we had come to consider our salvation from Chicago's muggy, traffic-jammed corridors and the pressures of graduate school. As we grew to know the region, we learned we weren't the only ones for whom its ground was holy. First, of course, had been the Anasazi people who, centuries earlier, had made their homes among the cliffs. Pueblo people followed, and Mexican Americans, mainly Roman Catholic, some of whose descendants' immaculate low-rider cars bore airbrushed images of Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe on their hoods. Whole communities of Sikhs, Benedictines, Muslims, and Presbyterians had also settled in the high desert of Northern New Mexico, apparently having concluded, as we had done, that walking on the sandy soil, being dwarfed by great, rusty canyons, and breathing piñon-tinged air were conducive to prayer.

Gratefully, we would pitch our tent in the campground at Ghost Ranch, a Presbyterian conference center. Toward evening, when other campers were firing up their Coleman stoves, Ken and I would visit the men's and women's cinderblock shower rooms, respectively, checking the cool corners for wayward snakes and leaving undisturbed the long-legged spiders who wove their webs in the window frames. We loved the landscape and the earthy hospitality of Ghost Ranch, but sometimes we craved silence that we couldn't find in the center's purposeful workshops and busy dining hall.

Silence is a Benedictine specialty, and at the Benedictine Monastery of Christ in the Desert, situated miles down an unimproved road near the Chama River, the silence is rich and layered—anxiety-provoking to the unaccustomed. Nowadays the monastery boasts an elegant and spacious visitors' center,

but when Ken and I visited there in the 1990s we bumped into each other in the monks' tiny gift and book shop. There I first discovered that monastic spirituality and desert spirituality were forms of Christian life that people had written about extensively, and even I, an urban Presbyterian, could practice these spiritualities in my way.

Benedict and His Desert Predecessors

The monks of Christ in the Desert live by the Rule of Saint Benedict, a slender, practical guide for contemplative life in community, written in the sixth century. A decade after I initially encountered Benedictine spirituality in Northern New Mexico, I published *Oblation*, a collection of prayers I had written, inspired by the gospel-infused wisdom of Benedict's Rule and by the prayerful, productive Benedictine Sisters of Tucson, Arizona, the Sonoran Desert city where Ken and I had come to make our home.

In the final chapter of the Rule—its epilogue—Benedict comments, “The purpose for which we have written this rule is to make it clear that by observing it in our monasteries we can at least achieve the first steps in virtue and good monastic practice. Anyone, however, who wishes to press on toward the highest standards of monastic life may turn to the teachings of the holy Fathers, which can lead those who follow them to the very heights of perfection.”¹

The “holy Fathers” to whom Benedict refers include, among others, Evagrius Ponticus, who was one of the first writers to record the sayings of desert-dwelling monastics of ancient Christendom, and John Cassian, whose *Institutes* and *Conferences* systematically present the organizing principles of third- and fourth-century desert monasteries and the spiritualities their residents practiced.

Loosely speaking, *City of Prayer* is the sequel to *Oblation*. The latter book consists of modern-day meditations on Benedict's sixth-century teachings. This collection of reflections applies to contemporary circumstances some insights of Benedict's

desert predecessors—men and women who gained renown for their pithy teachings on prayer, solitude, silence, humility, and other essentials of contemplative Christian life. As an oblate—a non-monastic affiliate of the Order of St. Benedict (and a thoroughly fallible one, at that)—I may not have achieved even “the first steps in virtue and good monastic practice” of which Benedict speaks. Nevertheless, I wish, as he says, “to press on,” if not to “the highest standards of monastic life,” then to the next phase in my exploration of an ancient-yet-modern Christian spirituality that balances prayer and work, solitude and community, self-awareness and service, and above all, reverences God.

Different Deserts, One Faith

I live in the arid zone called Southern Arizona. This severe-yet-fragile Sonoran region—renowned for its Giant Saguaro cactuses, which stand as tall as mature trees and develop “arms” only after seventy-five years of growth—is a different desert from the one that originally beckoned to Ken and me by way of Interstate 25. The Sonoran Desert is also miles and millennia from the Sinai Desert to which thousands of contemplative Christians fled in the third and fourth centuries, essentially to invent Christian monasticism. But both the American Southwest and the North African plateaus are, to borrow Belden Lane’s term, “fierce landscapes.” My travels and my years of permanent residence in Tucson have taught me what desert dwellers know: high heat and hard earth, severe terrain overarched by burning sky, will drive you into rigorous communion with your Creator. The desert will show you what you are and are not made of, what you do and do not need.

The Sonoran borderlands in which I live claim a terrible fame. Every year thousands of economic migrants—impoverished, undocumented people in search of work and living wages—walk from Mexico into the United States through largely uninhabited areas, and in appalling numbers die of exposure and dehydration. Some Christians of Tucson express

their faith through efforts to change immigration legislation, or by placing tanks of drinking water in some of the hottest, most highly trafficked and deadly stretches of desert. While I honor these ministries, I cannot claim them as my own.

I pastor a Presbyterian church north of Tucson, at the base of the Santa Catalina Mountains, in a rapidly developing residential and commercial area. As I drive to church and look out at housing and business developments clustered amid cacti and creosote bushes in the shadows of a rugged mountain range, I recall famous words of Athanasius, a fourth-century writer. He said of his monastic contemporaries, thousands of whom had ventured beyond the Nile Valley to inhabit a landscape more barren than Southern Arizona's, that they had "made the desert a city."

It would be unrealistic to suggest too close a comparison between ancient Desert Fathers and Mothers and today's general population of Southern Arizona. The lifestyle of residents living in the "master planned communities" and humbler manufactured homes near my church differs dramatically from that of ancient desert monastics. The Desert Fathers and Mothers could not have dreamed of such a present-day desert "necessity" as centralized cooling, but had this luxury been available to them they would have shunned it as an indulgent obstacle to the austere existence they pursued in order to draw closer to God.

Still, meaningful connections may be made between modern and ancient desert people of faith. For example, about ninety minutes' drive from Tucson, at the end of an unmarked road, a Greek Orthodox monastery, established in 1995, is dedicated to St. Anthony the Great. There a community of men obedient to an abbot hold all their possessions in common and devote their lives to a rigorous schedule of liturgical and private prayer and manual work. The monastery's namesake, Abba Anthony, a Desert Father who lived in Alexandria, Egypt in the third and fourth centuries, is sometimes described as the founder of Western monasticism. Anthony's biographer is the same

Athanasius who remarked on the monastic, urban transformation of Egypt's previously uninhabited regions.

"We must not forget that Christianity is a desert religion and therefore shaped by this environment. . . . The desert is honed down to essentials and requires the same of those living there." So writes the Oblate Master of Pluscarden Abbey in Elgin, Morayshire, Scotland, in a letter to Benedictine Oblates concerning "ceaseless prayer." In Mark Salzman's elegant, insightful novel of monastic life called *Lying Awake*, a Carmelite Sister observes that "the desert is what you bring to it, a landscape of the heart."

The Scottish Benedictine and the fictional Carmelite make roughly the same point: whether or not you practice your Christian faith amid the austerities of a physical desert, if you sincerely follow Jesus you will come to relinquish cushioning superfluities and learn the truth of who you are and who is the God on whom you utterly depend. "The Christian life is the same for everyone," notes Georgios I. Mantzarides, author of an article on orthodox monasticism to which the web site for St. Anthony's Greek Orthodox Monastery of Florence, Arizona is linked.

Because the Christian life, this desert religion, is ultimately the same for everyone—Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant, ancient and modern alike—and because Christians bring what we will to our navigations of the heart's landscape and lose what we must along the way, the sayings of those early Christian teachers, the Desert Fathers and Mothers, remain compelling many centuries after they were originally uttered and heard.

Forty Desert Days

The late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries saw the publication of numerous anthologies of sayings attributed to the Desert Fathers and Mothers. Also readily available to readers is a variety of commentaries, introductory as well as academic, on these ancient Christian teachings. In *City of Prayer* I don't presume to add to the scholarly corpus, but offer instead

one modern Christian voice, reflecting personally, honestly, and—I hope—faithfully on the implications of some forty sayings of the Desert Fathers and Mothers; a great many more such sayings exist. I hope to add to the expanding bibliography on desert spirituality the voice of one practitioner whose personal reflections on everyday matters of Christian faith and ministry, prompted by forty sayings of our ancient forebears, may encourage present-day readers to ground their spiritual lives in the wisdom of Christianity's most enduring teachers.

I am a preacher, and while they aren't sermons, the reflections in these pages make a homiletic move or two; they apply early Christian wisdom to modern life and encourage faithfulness to God as revealed by Jesus, whose forty-day wilderness sojourn sets the example for all Christians who would practice a spirituality shaped by the demands of the desert. *City of Prayer* may make for fitting reading during the weeks that lead to Easter. But just as the Desert Fathers and Mothers practiced their prayerful faith in all seasons, so might readers of this collection take it up at any time in the Christian year. Likewise, the reflections, each of which is self-contained, may be read in any order. Their relative brevity makes them suitable for inclusion in morning or evening devotions, while the reflections' candor may encourage spiritual book discussion group members to share their own lives' stories and interpretations of early Christians' sayings.

Jesus was confronted in the desert by the demons of idolatry, self-indulgence, and self-aggrandizement. Like many followers of Jesus, I, too, struggle with these and other temptations, as will become apparent in the reflections to follow. One Desert Mother, Amma Syncretica, said, "we . . . must kindle the divine fire in ourselves through tears and hard work."² In *City of Prayer* I recount some of my tears and hard work, and reflect as a pastor and spiritual practitioner on various dimensions of the life of faith in order to serve as an authentic, if imperfect, companion to readers seeking to go where Jesus leads and learn from some of his earliest, most trustworthy followers.

The Desert Fathers and Mothers renounced and retreated from the decadence of Roman culture to emulate, for the rest of their lives, Jesus' forty post-baptismal days in the Judean desert. The Abbas and Ammas (as the Fathers and Mothers were called) aspired to ceaseless, soul-changing prayer made possible by God's grace and their own freedom from excessive activity, socializing, noise, distraction, possessions, and pride. While some Desert Christians practiced extreme physical austerity and cultivated shame as though it were a virtue, the wisest ones pursued moderation in all things and balanced their solitary prayer with purposeful labor and availability to the spiritual pilgrims who visited them, seeking guidance, asking, "Give me a word." They have much to teach present-day people who hunger for a prayerful, transformational relationship with God that integrates solitude, silence, attentiveness, healthy humility, simplicity, and service.

I consider myself a present-day pilgrim and protégé of the Desert Mothers and Fathers. The road I have traveled to find them is paved with books. I give thanks especially for the numerous works of Benedicta Ward, SLG, a respected compiler and translator of early Christian monastics' sayings whose books, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* and *The Desert Fathers* I gratefully quote frequently and commend to readers; for Laura Swan, OSB, author of *The Forgotten Desert Mothers: Sayings, Lives, and Stories of Early Christian Women*, from which I also gratefully quote passages; for Mary Forman, OSB, whose *Praying with the Desert Mothers* is both learned and practical; and for David G. R. Keller, whose *Oasis of Wisdom* lucidly contextualizes the Desert Fathers and Mothers in history, place, culture, and spiritual tradition.

The Desert Fathers and Mothers preceded by roughly two centuries even Saint Benedict, who lived over fifteen hundred years ago. Yet Benedict's rule of life continues to exert a remarkable influence on an ecumenical and international array of Christians. Comparably, Benedict's instructive desert predecessors speak, sometimes prophetically, to a present generation of spiritual practitioners searching for ways to keep the faith

and keep it simple amid a culture of individualism, domination, greed, consumption, and exploitation. The sayings of the Desert Fathers and Mothers offer incisive antidotes to a humming, numbing climate of excess in which the overscheduling of time crowds out contemplation and the overvaluing of personal achievement underestimates the sovereignty of God.

When Jesus, ravenous and parched at the end of his forty Spirit-led desert days, was tempted to trade in his faithfulness for unlimited personal power, God and his faith in God strengthened him to withstand devilish enticements. Surely God also led Jesus' earliest monastic followers into the desert and sustained and taught them there. Two thousand years later and counting, present-day disciples of Jesus will be inspired, challenged, and comforted by the Desert Fathers' and Mothers' perseverance, counsel, and prayer.



In the fourth century, Christianity gained acceptance and became the official religion of the Roman Empire. As Christianity moved into the mainstream, the movement toward the desert and monastic life increased. The desert was a place for quieting the inner noise that kept [people] from hearing the whispers of God.

Laura Swan, OSB, *The Forgotten Desert Mothers*

Once a brother went to visit his sister who was ill in a nunnery. She was someone of great faith. She commanded him, "Go away, my brother, and pray for me, for by Christ's grace I shall see you in the kingdom of heaven."

*The Desert Fathers:
Sayings of the Early Christian Monks*

City of Prayer

Soon after the baptismal waters had dried
on the Emperor Constantine's skin,
underground Christians emerged
from their homes and catacombs,
blinking, barely believing
the revolution in Rome. High above
the sewage in the streets
and pantheistic palace-temples,
a basilica arose, domed and gleaming,
designed by imperial architects to impress Christ.
He, invisible, risen, kept busy
blessing the slaves who broke their backs
building this glorious church.

When the workers could no longer lift
the emperor's travertine slabs,
they returned to the shadows
where once they had hidden
in worshipful remembrance of Jesus,
the stonemason's son, God's beloved.
He, who had overcome his own crucifixion,
would surely come to save them.

But the bright sunlight of born-again Rome
had made Christ unrecognizable
to the catacomb Christians.
They set out by night for Egypt, Arabia, Syria, Palestine,
deserts for which prophets and penitents
had always been destined. These ragged Romans
were in for the Lent of their lives.
All the temptations they tried
to leave behind followed them
into their new, cryptic solitudes,
where, among scorpions, demons, and dunes,
they fought their way to salvation.

Whole pilgrim-populations followed,
and the stony wilderness was turned

into a city of prayer.

Centuries later, I seek my own path there,
to hear for myself, to try to understand
the blistering command and assurance
of one Desert Mother whose name
no one remembers:

Go away, she whispers, and pray for me.

I shall see you in the kingdom of heaven.

- Day 1 -

I Could Say as Much to You

Amma Theodora said, “A devout person happened to be insulted by someone, and replied, ‘I could say as much to you but the commandment of God keeps my mouth shut.’”

The Forgotten Desert Mothers, 66

In the Sonoran Desert, February is a sweet month. Pale, late winter sunlight floods the Santa Catalina Mountains, which rise up, grand and craggy, east of the church I pastor. From the window in my office I can see the lower elevations of these mountains. They’re reassuring, like an elder who has seen it all and watches out for you, protective but sufficiently humble and wise to keep quiet as you make your own way in the world.

It was the afternoon of Ash Wednesday, and I hadn’t yet composed the words I would say to the handful of parishioners who would gather for worship that evening. The day was so bright and beautiful I found it hard to feel penitentially Lenten, or even introspective. Back in Chicago, Ash Wednesday would have been a cold, slogging affair, a short gray day on which even a brief examination of conscience would readily reveal the soul’s gutters to be clogged with the wet and blackened leaves of impasse and regret, packed under grimy, weeks-old snow. I sat staring at Psalm 51, waiting for guidance, but its

2 *City of Prayer*

language of sinfulness and purification seemed irrelevant to the mild day at hand.

My mobile phone rang. Although I felt I shouldn't take a call just now, with the Ash Wednesday homily as yet unwritten, I answered. It's a bittersweet privilege to be the friend a friend can call to blurt, "I am so mortified, I feel like crawling into a hole."

My caller, my dear friend, was at that time navigating a delicate, uncertain period in her vocation and career. In a voice flattened by shock, but with her characteristic honesty and a helping of profanity, she told me the story, which, later on, she recounted discreetly on her blog, changing names, disguising details.

My friend's story went like this: a respected, elder colleague, Linda, had telephoned her. "She proceeds to tell me that a mutual colleague, Seth, had a 'concern' about me. Seth is a bit of a peacock and know-it-all. Evidently, he came to Linda about a specific . . . criticism of me . . . along the lines of, 'Seth thinks you should quit sweating so much.' A cut-me-to-the-bone kind of rejection of a fairly essential part of who I am. Something that I can't really imagine changing. Something necessary and vital to my life and vocation. My mouth hung open as Linda talked. I quickly thanked her for her concerns and got off the phone."

As I held my own phone to my ear, my friend's embarrassment and pain cast a shadow across the sunlit day, the way Ash Wednesday casts a shadow across a still-new year, or ashes, ritually applied, disfigure a clean forehead. *Remember that you are dust* is the message my friend had received, unexpectedly, harshly, unfairly. Who could blame her if she had returned the insult, retorting, "And to dust, Linda, *you* shall return"? But she did not return evil for evil, as if restrained by the commandment of God to which Amma Theodora refers: "A devout person happened to be insulted by someone, and replied, 'I could say as much to you but the commandment of God keeps my mouth shut.'"

On Ash Wednesday and on every other day of our lives we are all of us dust—inconsequential by most standards, and

eventually, by death, sure to be wiped clean off the face of the earth. This does not mean we need hurtful reminders of our fragility. Even people who behave in pompous and cowardly ways, as did the pseudonymous Seth, exploiting a third party to deliver a mean blow, warrant basic respect. As all of us have, Seth has surely taken some devastating hits in his own life. What else would explain his connivance and passive aggression? Wounded, unhealed souls are often those who find it impossible to practice what Theodora preaches, and keep their big mouths shut.

My friend concluded her blog posting with these words: “I don’t know why Linda decided to participate in this triangulated situation with Seth. I am going to do everything in my power to ignore it. Because my power is pretty weak, I would covet your prayers. My Lenten journey for this year involves letting go and not forcing other people to act the way that I think is right and proper. This is not to say that my feelings are not extremely bruised and tender.”

A few hours after concluding my afternoon phone conversation with my friend, I smeared ashes on the tender foreheads of the worshipers who had assembled at my church. But first, I read them a poem I had written.

To Number Our Days

. . . In all that we do we try to present ourselves as ministers of God, acting with patient endurance amid trials, difficulties, distresses, beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights, and hunger.

2 Corinthians 6:4-5

Tonight, the liturgy of grit—
the ashen smudge of finitude
thumbed onto your forehead.
Tonight, you join the communion
of disciples who hurried off to church

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just to be reminded of their brevity on earth,
and accept the creaturely, Christian bruise
of a dirty cross above the eyes.

Why? Why put ourselves through
this grim ritual and terrifying talk
of dust and dying?

*In all that we do we try
to present ourselves as ministers of God,
acting with patient endurance amid trials.*

You and the faithful remnant
go forward for your annual defacement.
As you make your way back to the pews,
you're aware that carbon particles—
the stuff that dust
and all of us are made of—
are settling on your eyebrows,
darkening your outlook.

You look around
at the small congregation of faces,
all bearing the same shadowy mark:
our Creator's single, stark initial,
spelling out the story of our lives.

- Day 2 -

Work and Pray

When the holy Abba Anthony lived in the desert, he was beset by *accidie*, and attacked by many sinful thoughts. He said to God, “Lord, I want to be saved but these thoughts do not leave me alone; what shall I do in my affliction? How can I be saved?” A short while afterwards, when he got up to go out, Anthony saw a man like himself, sitting at his work, getting up from his work to pray, then sitting down and plaiting a rope, then getting up again to pray. It was an angel of the Lord sent to correct and reassure him. He heard the angel saying to him, “Do this and you will be saved.” At these words, Anthony was filled with joy and courage. He did this, and he was saved.

The Sayings of the Desert Fathers, 1-2

Students of monastic spirituality and early Christian history revere Abba Anthony as a holy man—a saint, in fact. Having lived in the desert of third-century Egypt, Anthony is known as “The Father of Monks,” the originator of monasticism in the Western world. It may surprise you, then, to learn that Anthony struggled with *accidie*, which is traditionally translated as “sloth.” What this means is that at times Anthony found it so hard to get himself going, to focus his mind and accomplish his goals, that he was driven to ask for God’s help. He may

even have lost sight of his life's purpose, and wondered what he was living for. Not only that, but "many sinful thoughts" attacked him. He felt so besieged by preoccupations that he was unable to pursue his deepest desire: to know the love and mercy of God.

Sound familiar? Maybe so. Many of us turn to books like the one in your hands when we are struggling with the very difficulties Anthony faced. We long for God. We want to live a life in which we enjoy an awareness of the sacred, loving relationships, personal well-being, and meaningful work in the service of a shared hope for the world. But at times we find it hard to get off the couch. We intend to develop our inner lives, but we veg out instead, watching reruns on TV, avoiding the very thing we long for, and then berating ourselves for being lazy and unproductive, "not spiritual enough."

A friend of mine—a gifted woman of faith who can at times be very hard on herself—has a simple name for merciless self-criticism and other negative ruminations: "Bad Mind." It seems that even Saint Anthony of Egypt suffered from Bad Mind. It was not some innate perfection that eventually led Anthony to sainthood; it was his creative and faithful struggle against the same difficult internal forces—sapped enthusiasm and mental malignancy—that beset you and me at times. We can tell from Anthony's prayer that he yearned to be saved, and not only in the hereafter. In the here-and-now Anthony ached for salvation from the deep fatigue and maddening anxieties that kept him from communing wholeheartedly with God.

And then, one day, Anthony saw a man going about his life in a very different spirit from Anthony's own discouragement and desperation. The man worked, braiding fibers, perhaps derived from water reeds, into rope. He would get up periodically to pray, and then return to his efforts. Anthony saw the man as an angel not because a luminous aura surrounded him but because he showed Anthony a way through his dilemma. "Do this," the man said, "and you will be saved." Did he mean that Anthony, too, should become a rope maker? That would be too

literal a reading of the scene. The man exemplified balance. He worked and prayed in equal measure. He didn't worry about himself, but rather performed a service, created a product that would be of use to others. And regularly he turned to face his Creator, to give thanks and seek guidance and blessing.

"Anthony was filled with joy and courage" because the solution to his problems was revealed as simple and clear. What would save Anthony from his physical lethargy and the quagmire of his thoughts would be to alternate his unworried engagement in practical tasks with acts of direct and sincere devotion to God. "He did this, and he was saved." As he worked, energy flowed back into his body. As he prayed, his mind became clear and unencumbered. He remembered who he was and whose he was. He cultivated a practice, a way of life that balanced work and prayer. Over time this freed him from torpor and self-defeat.

Today Anthony may be an angel sent by God to instruct and reassure you. The simple story of a great man who faithfully overcame the same spiritual difficulties you may face—discouragement and worry—is perhaps enough to restore your joy and encourage you. Your salvation is not something you must win by professing your formulaic assent to one religious tenet. Nor must you work to be saved. Your salvation is your daily experience of God's life-giving goodness. Anthony's story makes clear that by living a life in balance, by interspersing your active responsibilities with restorative reflection, you will avail yourself of God's saving grace.

- Day 3 -

A Desert Retreat

Matrona said, “Many solitaries living in the desert have been lost because they lived like people in the world. It is better to live in a crowd and want to live a solitary life than to live in solitude and be longing all the time for company.”

The Desert Fathers, 11

What is on your calendar today, or tomorrow? Does the day stretch out before you, blessedly empty of obligations and deadlines, promising you solitude and peace? Or will you be running from appointment to appointment, scrambling to keep your commitments, going full speed until you drop, exhausted, at the end of the day? Or might your day consist of some happy medium between quiet contemplation and frenetic overactivity?

I write this reflection on a day in which I’m attempting to find that happy medium, although I’d prefer a day of total quiet. Let me tell you a little about this morning. It seems illustrative of the challenges many of us face in seeking time for peace and prayer in the midst of our busy lives.

Going on right now is a daylong meeting at which I’ve arranged to arrive late. I have made this arrangement in order to protect my writing time, which is an important spiritual

practice for me. But as I sat down to write this morning, anxiety tugged at my mind and urged me to check my calendar. I discovered I had double-booked myself for one morning next week. At one and the same time I was scheduled to be present at a retreat center, teaching a class on *lectio divina* (the practice of monastic prayerful reading), and to be at the church I pastor on the other side of town, hosting a guest speaker, a gracious Muslim woman who has agreed to explain some basics of Islam to a group of interested Christians.

I have yet to learn how to clone myself or accomplish “bi-location.” I cannot be in two places at once. In fact, I often try to avoid multitasking, because being present to the present moment is an important way to practice mindfulness in the midst of activity, to be attentive, aware, responsive to the movements of God’s Spirit in the day’s occurrences. But as I considered the conflict on my calendar the mindful quiet of this morning’s writing time was quickly giving way to worry about how I would resolve my scheduling dilemma.

It was from Benedictines that I learned the approach to prayerful reading that I was scheduled to teach at the retreat center. I telephoned a Benedictine friend of mine, a longtime monastic Sister named Lenora, whose monastery is situated just two miles from my house. Lenora combines contemplative devotion to God with remarkable warmth and enthusiasm toward people. She agreed to substitute teach the class at the retreat center, explaining that she had no obligations at the monastery that day because it would be her designated “hermit day,” a monthly day that members of her community usually reserve for solitary prayer.

Possibly, when Lenora fills in for me at the retreat center, teaching some twenty spiritual seekers the art of prayerful reading, a part of her will long for “the hermitage,” the time alone she sacrificed in order to help a friend. “It is better,” says Amma Matriona, “to live in a crowd and want to live a solitary life than to live in solitude and be longing all the time for company.” According to this Desert Mother, by publicly engaging in the

life of a learning community and perhaps hungering for a bit of reflective quiet, Sister Lenora will be doing what is preferable to maintaining a reluctant, lonely, and distracted solitude.

If you have ever made a silent retreat by yourself, perhaps you have relished the unstructured quiet, the freedom simply to be in God's presence. Or maybe, like many people unaccustomed to unscheduled hours empty of conversation, entertainment, and news, you have found the silence intimidating or boring. You haven't known what to do with yourself, or what the Spirit might be doing with you while you endure the slow and shapeless progression of hours. If you don't run away from solitude at the first signs of discomfort you can learn to be alone and keep quiet. You can learn to listen with your bones for secrets untold in noisy, busy places. You can learn to love the silence, which is the language God speaks, and learn to love yourself, the true and unpretentious self who emerges in the silence. You can even learn to long for solitude, to need places and periods when you and God simply dwell together, without cable television or mobile telephones.

As I write these words I imagine the serenity of a desert retreat house I have visited numerous times. I love to sit in the library there, with my back to books reassuringly shelved in orderly rows, facing windows that look out to rocky, golden soil, scrubby vegetation, and an unmarked sky. My yearning to get back there, Amma Matrona tells me, is a better thing than would be my dwelling there, itching to go to the mall or make a phone call.

Learn to long for a desert retreat of your own, whatever may be the particular geography where you live. You need not travel to Egypt or the American Southwest in order to experience the daunting, beckoning landscape of your interior desert, the place within you so quiet that you can hear cactus needles standing up to the wind and hear God dreaming your life. Believe Amma Matrona when she tells you it's a good thing to yearn for such silence, such solitude.