

Meditators' Blog 03/10/2011



The Ever-Changing Wilderness by James Bishop

?Hold on,? I barely aspirated to my friend. I hadn't realized until now the sad state of my physical well-being. I had made this climb before, over twelve years before, and it hadn't been a problem. I had even been heavier then. Now, I was having trouble making it half-way up the hill.

Twelve years ago I had often climbed this hill. I was younger, but certainly not healthier. I was not spiritually well, nor was I mentally well. I was suffering from alcoholism, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and several other problems. It seemed there was no solution in sight. It took a severe lifestyle change for me to finally begin healing. For me, that severe lifestyle change was incarceration.

One of my greatest fears since I was a child was being alone. As an adopted child, this fear was perhaps stronger than in most children. I had always feared abandonment. Yet, even as a child, I had felt an other-worldly presence that was there in the most lonely times. And, as I look back on it now, it was only in the lonely times that I was able to sense that presence.

These lonely times can be likened to a wilderness of sorts; it is a beautiful place, but also very lonely. We can be overcome by the sense of loneliness and fail to recognize the other-worldly presence that is there. Instead of letting love cast out fear (1 Jn. 4:18), we often let our fears block our reception to love.

When I had hiked up this hill twelve years ago, I was alone. There were other people with me, but this was a different kind of alone, and I was overcome with anxiety about loneliness, unreceptive to the beauty of the place. Now as I paused, catching my breath, I looked around at the beautiful redwoods, the rolling hills, and the whole of the wilderness. The wilderness is a big place, full of beauty but also full of loneliness.

When St. Benedict wrote his Rule for monastic living he saw the wilderness around him, the physical wilderness surrounding the monastery. He also saw the wilderness of the soul, a loneliness that can only be quenched by that other-worldly presence. He wrote not only about the sixth century, not only about head-shaven monks in robes living in small cells. He also wrote about you and me. He wrote about the accountant who works from nine to five each day, the cashier at the store who is single and raising a child, the farmer driving a tractor across his fields. His Rule, in a deeper sense, is all about living no matter who you are or in what year you are living.

The first time I had read Benedict's rule, I was in prison. I immediately saw a parallel between the monasteries of old and the prisons of today. I saw them as wildernesses. Now that I am no longer in prison, I recognize the wilderness all around me in the everyday world. Every day, I am in the wilderness of the world. When I read about crime, natural disasters and other things that make me sad, I am in the wilderness. I can feel alone, or I can listen for that still, small voice.

Living Benedict's Rule in today's world can be difficult, and admittedly there are many passages in the Rule that seem to have little relevance to our lives today. However, I spent a lot of time studying the Rule and looking into the relevance of each passage, first when I was in prison, and again after my release. I saw that Benedict describes a way of living we can all live, whether in a monastery, prison, office, car, or even hiking up a hill.

Isaiah's 43rd chapter says, *?Behold, I will do a new thing; now it shall spring forth; shall you not know it? I will even make a way in the wilderness, and rivers in the desert.?* Benedict's Rule helps us to see that way in the wilderness more clearly in our daily lives.

In November, my first book, *A Way in the Wilderness*, will be released. In the book, I walk through each chapter of Benedict's Rule, applying it to my life in prison and now after prison. I invite you to walk along this path with me through the wilderness.

Each day we can choose to see the wilderness in which we live as a lonely place or as a beautiful place. I invite you to see the beauty, and to learn and grow along with me on this path.

I finally made it to the top of the hill, and could see the vast wilderness all around me. It was more beautiful than ever. And just like life sometimes, even though I felt out of breath, I didn't feel alone.

Above picture: James in the wilderness

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