

I.

Finding Light



ANTHONY AND JOSEPH

One day some monks came to see Anthony of Egypt, the most renowned hermit of his day. With them was Abbot Joseph. Anthony chose a text from Scripture and beginning with the youngest monk, asked each one what it meant. Each gave his opinion as he was able. But to each one, the revered teacher said, "You have not understood it." Last of all, he said to Abbot Joseph, "How do you explain this saying?" The abbot replied, "I do not know." Then Anthony said, "Indeed Abbot Joseph has found the way. For he has said, 'I do not know.'"

—Wisdom Story

taken from *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers and Mothers*
as told by Sister Lillian Harrington, "Pilgrim Minister"

The glassmaker's art begins in simplicity. It requires only a few elemental ingredients. The artist grinds sand, soda, and lime into a fine powder. That marks the first transformation. When immersed in the crucible of fire, these three elements convert to liquid. Brushed by air, a wholly new substance emerges. Infused with color, it becomes a prism for light.

In 1947, a German-born glassmaker named Emil Frei traveled to Atchison, Kansas. He had received a commission to create a new set of stained glass windows to rise above the main chapel at Mount St. Scholastica Monastery. Frei chose a background color that merged several shades of blue. What he could not know then was that a secondary alchemy would transform his windows over time. The harsh sunlight and fierce winds of the Kansas prairie bleached the stained glass into a new color, one that today reflects a blend of sun, sky, sea, and stone. It is a distinctive gray-blue that exists nowhere else. It has come to be called "Atchison blue."

To this day, pilgrims still pray beneath the unerring gaze of Frei's blue windows. They travel to this Benedictine monastery in the heart of America's heartland, desiring transformation. Some hope to deepen an already solid faith. Some crave a temporary respite from cell phones, Facebook, Twitter, and the other white noise of the world beyond. Still others hope to repair a broken spiritual life. I have been one of those seekers.

My journey with the Mount sisters began in an oak stall in the choir chapel awash in Atchison blue. I'd come with my husband, Charles Reynard, to lead a retreat for busy professionals like ourselves seeking to slow down, find balance, and tap into the sacred. For several weekends in a row, we had

dashed from city to city, speaking to various groups and working all the while at our weekday jobs—I as a religion news correspondent for PBS-TV, he as an Illinois Circuit Court judge. The morning we were to give our presentation at the Mount, I sat alone in the chapel. I wondered how I was going to speak to a retreat group later that day about nourishing the soul when I hadn't fed my own soul a decent meal in weeks.

Sunlight beamed through the stained glass, throwing patches of blue on the chapel's walls and ceiling. Silence saturated the room. I peered at the image on the window above me: St. Benedict standing with outstretched arms. Some words were written in Latin: *Omni tempore silentio debent studere*. "At all times, cultivate silence."

The paradox I had been living stared me in the face. For months, I had been talking, talking, talking, driving myself to exhaustion trying to help others live a more contemplative life. What I lacked in my own life were moments of stillness and silence when I simply could listen and *be*. Without them, I was losing drop by drop the inner reserves I needed to do my work and cultivate an interior life. In the silence of the chapel, I did something totally out of character. I wept.

I left the Mount after that first visit feeling as if something nameless had shifted inside me. I kept thinking about that moment in the chapel, the sisters I had encountered, the stories they had told. One of the first sisters I met there was ninety-year-old Sister Lillian Harrington. Something she said stayed with me. In the course of our many conversations, she often joked about her advanced age. I shared with her my own fear of growing old and dying, and I asked her if she ever

thinks about death. She looked at me quizzically, then drilled her pale blue eyes into mine. “I don’t think about dying,” she said. “I think about living.”

Living mindfully, looking beyond the obvious. I wondered if I’d arrive at my deathbed without having done either. The sisters, by contrast, seemed sure of purpose. They infused ordinary acts, such as waking, gardening, and even eating, with meaning. I sensed that monastic life had something to teach me, something I couldn’t find in the self-help books lining the shelves of Barnes & Noble, assuring married, professional women like me that we could have it all. I had often returned to the writings of the Desert Fathers and Mothers, ancient Abbas and Ammas who retreated to barren settings to seek God and wisdom. But their words lacked living color. Here at the Mount were 145 modern-day Ammas, alive and well and living on the Great Plains. And yet, it wasn’t as if the sisters had suddenly presented me with a neatly wrapped gift box of answers. Rather, they seemed to draw out the inner questions I had silenced.

I soon began spending an average of a week a month at the Mount. My husband joined me on weekends whenever he could. My visits to the monastery coincided with a pivotal time, both personally and professionally. It was only my second year of marriage. Although I cannot imagine a truer soulmate than my husband, I struggled as a second wife thrust into a blended family that included two adult stepdaughters who were none too happy about our marriage. I quickly discovered that the skills that served me so well as a journalist—a genuine interest in others, a can-do attitude, and a dogged

determination to “get things right”—counted for little in my new role. I often joked to friends that I had become a wife, a mother, and eventually a grandmother—what takes most women a lifetime to achieve—all in the space of six months. I laughed to cover the loneliness I felt at being the outside link in my new family unit, the person who got everything wrong.

Even as I struggled to solve the divisions within my family, I felt increasingly disconnected from my church. In the public arena, so-called Christians divided the world between insiders and outcasts. Like many Catholics, I despaired over the clergy sex abuse scandal as well as the increasingly politicized statements made by our bishops—pronouncements that seemed geared at pointing to the splinters in everyone else’s eyes but their own. With few exceptions, poor preaching poured from the pulpits. “The hungry sheep look up and are not fed,” John Milton wrote of the Church of the seventeenth century. His observation seemed sadly accurate today. I felt myself slipping further from the faith that had been so integral to my life.

At the Mount, my husband and I experienced the vital, compassionate Church of the gospels, not a tired, passionless, and scandal-smearing bureaucracy. The sisters did as St. Francis purportedly advised: “Preach the gospel always. Use words if necessary.” I once asked a retired abbot why he visited the Mount so often. He told me he found light there. “Without it,” he said, “I’d be bouncing from wall to wall in a room called life, looking for the light switch.”

This is the story of my journey with the Mount sisters—both the physical journeys that took me from my home in central Illinois to Atchison and the interior journey that rose

and shifted within me, sometimes imperceptibly, sometimes with gale-force winds. It is a story that includes not only the sisters but also the constellation of characters that orbit a place like the Mount: the monks in the abbey down the road, the laypeople who work there, and the visitors who add their grace notes to a monastery's rhythm of life.

My early visits were mostly a time of listening and observing. Eventually, in the quiet of the monastery, I began to sense a movement of the heart, to use a favorite phrase of St. Bernard of Clairvaux. I came face-to-face with my worst demons: a quick temper; a propensity to work too hard; a tendency to be judgmental, petty, and insecure. I wrestled too with how to strike a balance between the writing work I so much loved and my desire to live a more contemplative life. And I would finally confront my long-standing fear of death, learning through the sisters to reconcile the fact of death with a love for life.

Ultimately, I would arrive at a deeper understanding of the necessities of prayer, contemplation, and silence. I would rebuild my faith within a Church that seemed increasingly withdrawn from the day-to-day realities of life. And I would grasp the meaning of two words that came to define my struggle for deep personal change: *conversatio morum*, what the Benedictines call conversion of life. *Conversatio* is like the slow, steady process that transformed the choir chapel windows into their exceptional blue color.

My sojourns at the Mount taught me something else, too. A monastery is like a mirror we hold up to the soul. It reflects back to us our weaknesses, struggles, flaws. But by looking

deeply into that mirror, we can come face-to-face with an answer.

II.

Listening



STORIES

In the long, long ago, the Lord God searched for a people to be his own.

God went to the Greeks and asked, "What can you do for me if I make you my chosen people?"

"We are gifted architects. We can build beautiful temples where people can come in great numbers from all over the world to worship you."

"Thank you very much," God said, and moved on.

Then the Lord God went to the Romans and said, "What can you do for me if I make you my chosen people?"

"We are great builders of roads and bridges. We will build bridges and roads so that the people can find their way to you."

"Thank you very much," God said, and moved on.

Then God went to the Jewish people and asked, "What can you do for me if I make you my chosen people?"

An old rabbi answered for them. "We are not gifted architects. Neither are we great builders of roads and bridges. What we can do is tell stories."

And God said, "Then you will be my people."

—Wisdom Story
as told by Sister Lillian Harrington, "Pilgrim Minister"

Crossing a Bridge

To arrive at Mount St. Scholastica, you cross Contrary Creek, drive beneath God's Mountain Camp, and bypass Last Chance Road. It is a six-hour ride westward from my home in central Illinois to Atchison. First Interstate 55, then Interstate 72 slice through flat fields of corn and soybeans. Occasionally, a farmhouse or falling-down barn pops up in the distance. Aluminum grain bins glint in the sunlight. Across the Mississippi River, at the state line, the landscape changes almost instantly from flatland to hills and rolling prairies. Billboards at Hannibal, Missouri, invite travelers to visit *Mark Twain Historic Sites*. But the only site I visit in Twain's hometown on this trip is the inside of the ladies' room at the Pick-A-Dilly Quik Stop.

From Hannibal, it's a straight shot across the upper chest of Missouri to Kansas. Having grown up outside of the amusement park that's New York City, the Midwest always feels to me like the adult America—the place where you settle down to raise tomatoes and a family. This isn't exactly the Bible Belt, but it is Elmer Gantry country. *Find Jesus before it's too late!* blares a billboard near the Wooden Nickel antiques shop. Another road sign asks, *How much does an abortion cost?* Answer: *One human life.*

I have no idea how well *human* life fares in these parts, but in all my travels I have never seen so much road kill. I begin to count: four deer, six raccoons, thirteen possums. It reminds me of St. Benedict's admonition: "Day by day, remind yourself you are going to die."

Route 36 eventually curls into an old shoe of a highway, Route 59, at a town called St. Joseph. Houses with wood or

aluminum siding in various stages of disrepair line the roadside. Here, the Stinkie Fingers Bait Shop offers up night crawlers and red wigglers. And the Cowboy Cobbler sits in a roadside trailer, ready to re-heel your shoes while you wait.

Closer to Atchison, the limestone bluffs over the Missouri River rise into view like a set of towering shoulders. To gaze on them is to glimpse a ten thousand-year-old part of the earth's body. A long line of coal cars from the Burlington Northern Santa Fe pauses beneath the bluffs for a rest, then starts rolling again with an ear-splitting wail. The BNSF is the great-grandchild of the old Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe of song lore. Judy Garland sang of its blaring whistles, weary passengers, and smoking engines in the 1946 film *The Harvey Girls*. Pretty much all I knew about Atchison before I started coming to the Mount was that song.

I'm not expecting the set of *The Harvey Girls*, but Atchison is definitely not Brooklyn. A sign at the Broken Spoke Café announces, *Texas Hold 'Em every Wednesday and Friday night*. There is something broken and sad about these parts, as if time stopped ticking around 1965. Past a couple of junkyards, gas stations, and discount liquor stores, I reach a steel two-lane bridge named for Amelia Earhart, Atchison's most famous daughter.

The Missouri–Kansas line lies smack in the middle of the bridge. I think of how many times in my life some significant event was preceded by crossing a bridge. I walked across the old Thirtieth Street Bridge in Bayonne, New Jersey, with my mother on my first day of school. I crossed the *Pont Neuf* in Paris as a college student on my way to classes at the Sorbonne.

I passed the bridges over the Thames near Fleet Street when I worked in the London bureau of the *Wall Street Journal*.

The Amelia Earhart Bridge shakes violently as a couple of semis approach from the opposite direction. Later I learn it is on the Missouri Transportation Department's list of bridges designated as "structurally deficient."

Halfway across, I spot a cross enclosed in a circle, rising from the monastery's roof. I turn left past Bradken Engineered Products—the old Atchison Casting Company—where a parade of rugged-looking men marches across the road at shift change.

Soon the monastery comes into view, its red brick wings like outstretched arms embracing the city below. My trip from Hannibal to Atchison mirrors the route taken by thirty-year-old Mother Evangelista Kremmeter, the Mount's first prioress, and the six other sisters who arrived on a chilly November night in 1863. They sought to live peacefully within a nation at war and to educate the young women of a westward-expanding land. Ever since young Mary O'Keefe (herself destined to join the monastery) saw the Mount's first home being built and called out, "The sisters are coming, the sisters are coming," Benedictine women have been an enduring presence on the Great Plains. Instead of crossing a bridge, Mother Evangelista and the others stepped off a railroad car onto a muddy path at St. Joseph, then ferried across the river to Atchison. Two carpenters from St. Benedict's Abbey (established a few years earlier) greeted them with swinging lanterns. Mother Evangelista would write later in her diary, "The love of God keeps me from fearfulness."