

5 April 2008

Dear Friends at FCC,

Several days ago, while wandering a steep hillside near the monastery, I came upon a fox. She was lovely and more than a little curious. I half-expected her to scurry off into the brush – or whatever it is foxes do when big-boned humans show up, whispering like Mr. Rogers. She didn't scurry at all. She sat in the road and looked me over. I sat down myself and watched her watch me.

She had a gorgeous grey coat (who'd have thought grey could be gorgeous?!) and red fur on the down-side of her tail and belly. After a while, she tired of me and climbed atop a pile of stones by a bend in the road. She looked completely at home there, as if she'd been there a thousand times before. And there she stayed, still as a fox can be, patiently waiting for me to move along. Which I eventually did.



Moving down the road, I turned to check on her two or three times. And there she remained, still and silent, watching, waiting, wondering when the next rabbit or gopher would come along. Hers was the kind of focus I ache for. On my return up the hill, I found her in the same spot, on the same pile, looking in the same direction.

I want my stillness to be born, like the fox', in passion and necessity. As I move through this first week of silent retreat, among monks and pilgrims who've made this practice their life, I hope to touch that silence, embrace that silence, practice it much as the fox does. Naturally. Patiently. Passionately. Yesterday, I came across an essay by John Roger Barrie, who says, "The eloquence of deepest silence echoes from the eternal...Ever abiding within and without, overlaid with the mutable patchwork garment we know as this visible universe, silence forms the woof and warp of all things seen and unseen...To the mystic, silence is the ground, the core of reality. All else relates to and emanates from it." Honestly, the fox on the hill can't survive without this silence. That may be true for the rest of us as well.

Heavy stuff, eh? Every night, around 7, the Benedictine monks here invite rookies like me to sit with them in prayer, silence and meditation. We do this in a stunning round chapel, sitting on the floor in a kind of pregnant quiet. It really doesn't matter what traditions we embrace – most are Catholic; but some of us are Protestant, some Buddhist, some decidedly agnostic. In the passing of minutes, in the darkening of night, in the silence, especially in the silence, the eternal seems to descend on the whole motley crew. Or maybe it's this way: the eternal wells up within the motley crew and starts to spill out and among us. Barrie says, "The mystic consciously dives into this silence, at first unfelt. With repeated practice it becomes a living, palpable Presence filled with immeasurable vitality.." I'm thinking of my fox friend again. Immeasurable vitality. Watching for that rabbit.

Except for one brief check-in call to Kate a little while ago, I haven't had a conversation in five full days. Imagine that. Not a conversation. Of any kind. The day here is oriented around 4 prayer services, or "offices." The first begins at 5:30 a.m. (the wake-up bell sounds at 5:15!). I rise in the pitch dark, stumble to the chapel beneath a diamond-studded sky, and pray with the monks as the sun comes up. It's really quite remarkable. It's almost as if each day takes on the shape and feel of resurrection: we rise with Mary while it's still dark, we trip into the darkness hoping for light, and we celebrate the always-shocking and never-routine coming of the sun. It speaks my name. And yours. And ours.



I've done a lot of writing – letters, journal, a couple of new hymns. I've also done some reading – essays on the conflict in Israel and Palestine, sermons by Walter Brueggemann, the poems of Rumi and Thich Nhat Hanh. All in all, it's everything I hoped it would be, and so much more. Each day, a revelation and a gift.

On Monday, I head home for a few weeks, eager to play cards and go to a Giants game and cook from some complicated recipes. At the end of the month, I'm off to Israel, Palestine, and a whole lot of new experiences there.

My blessings go with every one of you, in your journeys and adventures. Know the grace and boundless vitality of the Holy Spirit. Just like a fox.

Yours in all the Light,

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