



# Living in Rhythm

## *Following Nature's Rule*

Br. James Koester, SSJE

*Q. What are we by nature?*

*A. We are part of God's creation, made in the image of God.*

*Q. What does it mean to be created in the image of God?*

*A. It means that we are free to make choices: to love, to create, to reason, and to live in harmony with creation and with God.*

These opening sentences of the Catechism of the *Book of Common Prayer* identify us, first and foremost, as part of God's creation. We can only thrive when we "live in harmony with creation and with God" ("An Outline of the Faith," *Book of Common Prayer*, Church Publishing: 1979, 845).

I've come to know this myself in a profound way: Several years ago, I moved from the SSJE Monastery, right in the heart of Harvard Square in Cambridge, to our rural Monastery called Emery House. The Emery family had lived and farmed this land for over 300 years before entrusting it to the Society in 1950. From a world of high granite arches and marble altars, stained glass and organ music, with cars passing just outside the door on Memorial Drive, I found myself suddenly surrounded, day in and day out, month after month, by new sights and sounds: meadow grasses bending in a breeze, frost icing the branches of the beech grove, the companionship of a flock of wonderfully noisy, inquisitive geese. There were no street lights but the stars. And, as often as not, my experience of the Daily Office was now punctuated by bird calls.

As I adjusted to these new surroundings – which were of course already known to me from my frequent stays at Emery House – it turned out that this new world was not as familiar as I'd thought. I found no end of lessons waiting in the world around me. The bees, for instance, taught me to do one thing at a time. If my focus or attention drifted, I found they had an unpleasant habit of reminding me who actually was in charge. The garden taught me that you can't simply take the harvest, you also must invest in the soil by rotating crops and adding nutrients, by composting and mulching. The geese constantly reminded me of the importance of joy in our lives, for they are some of the most joyful creatures God ever created, especially first thing in the morning when I let them out of the coop or when they attempt to take flight in a rush to greet me when I appear in the garden later in the day.

The more I listened and learned, the more I began to suspect that, living more closely in touch with nature at Emery House, I wasn't just becoming a better gardener and a better gosherd and a better beekeeper. I realized that, perhaps, I was also becoming a better monk, a better Christian – even, a better human being.

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In the gospels, Jesus frequently points to creation as a way to teach us about the Kingdom and our abiding in God. He invites us to consider the lilies of the fields, to look at the mustard seed, to abide in the vine, and to ponder the mystery of pruning. His parables illustrate their lessons with common objects and activities from the natural world – sowing, pruning, and reaping, for example – admittedly more familiar to his original audience than to readers two millennia later. (We tend to have lives more distanced from nature now.) But there is also a deeper reason for the presence of such natural imagery throughout the Scriptures. From the very opening of the book of Genesis – when we see God at work, making the earth – the creation promises to offer us a direct link back to its Creator. By looking to the wonder of creation, we begin to fathom the mystery of our belonging to the God who made us, too. As people with the eyes of faith, we see in the yearly cycle of the seasons the transfiguring power of the Spirit, restoring all things in Christ who himself fills all things.

One of the earliest members of our community, Father George Congreve, SSJE, taught powerfully about this restoration. He saw that humanity's perfect unity with creation had been lost in the Fall: "The coming of sin brought estrangement between man and nature. The happiness of their union in serving God was broken." But Father Congreve also saw that the resurrection of Christ promises a restoration of that unity: "As the Son of Man raised to the Right Hand of God gathers all mankind into blessing . . . so He heals the estrangement between man and nature, and lifts up to God both together in Himself. Thus the unity not of mankind only, but the whole of creation is restored in Christ." Restoration – the restoration of our balance with nature, as well as the restoration of the natural world itself – teaches us our own place as creatures, natural creatures, placed on this earth by a loving Creator.

And what a creation it is! SSJE's founder, Father Benson, encourages us to "look to the glory" of God, and we behold this glory not only in the Ascended Christ, where Father Benson focused our attention, but we see this glory too, imprinted on creation. It's visible everywhere around us. Such wonder and beauty reveals the bounty and generosity of God, the Chief Gardener, working endlessly toward the good of God's creation and creatures. As the psalmist reminds us: "O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all, the earth is full of your creatures" (Psalm 104: 25).

For this reason, one of the things that I really value about Emery House is the night sky. I don't know very much about stars – I can't identify constellations or anything like that – but I just love to look up at the heavens. Living under the stars teaches me over and over again about the magnificence of God. As counter intuitive as it might seem, in a way, I would

say the same thing about sitting in the Monastery Chapel: When I sit in the Monastery Chapel, I'm amazed by the skill of the Master Craftsman who made the human craftsmen who built it. (How could God have created humans who could create something like this?) Whether sitting in the Monastery Chapel or gazing up at the night sky at Emery House after Compline, the masterpiece of the Creator is all around us, drawing our hearts to God.

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When we begin to be attentive to the work of the Creator, it can transform the way we are alive to the lessons unfolding around us. We notice purpose and intention behind the beauty. There is form and structure and order in creation, put there by the hand of the Chief Gardener who tends it. Seen from a distance, the natural world may look crazy and chaotic - just a jungle to us - and yet, nature is much more dependent and interdependent than we might think.

We invited Tom Wessels, a natural historian, to walk the Emery House property with the Brothers and some of our advisors. Tom's expertise allows him to "read" a landscape and interpret its history: what the land was used for, how it has changed over time, what crops may have been grown on it, when certain parts of the property might have been used for pasture, and when the meadows and fields were allowed to revert to forest. Tom explained to us that nature actually communicates with itself through various means. Trees can communicate with one another underground through the root system, and in the air, through their leaves, allowing them to synchronize the production of leaves and seeds as well as to prepare themselves for an invasion of pests. (See Tom Wessels' book, *Reading the Forested Landscape: A Natural History of New England*, The Countryman Press, 1997.)

So, for instance, take oak trees. Oak trees produce acorns on a seven-year cycle. Every year, they produce a few acorns and then, on the seventh year, they produce a plenitude of acorns. This is called masting. It turns out that all the acorns in New England mast on the same seven-year cycle, because they can communicate with all the other oak trees across New England - except the trees on Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket, which mast on a different cycle. The trees can't communicate that far. From even this one example we see that while nature may look quite chaotic, in the mind of God it's much more ordered and has more form, pattern, and rhythm than we might at once perceive.

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The most easily perceptible patterns in nature take the shape of cycles. There is the yearly cycle of the seasons. There's the daily cycle of the sunset, night, dawn, and day. And then there are other, more specific cycles. My favorite example is one I didn't learn about until a few years ago, here at Emery House: the chicken cycle!

It turns out that a chicken can lay an egg every twenty-five hours, depending on the amount of sunlight it gets. (A chicken needs about fourteen to sixteen hours of sunlight in order for

the hormones to kick in to lay the egg.) Who knew that egg-laying was connected to the sun? Well, with our brood at Emery House, we noticed that the production of eggs declined as the days got shorter and the nights got longer. Of course, commercial farmers have learned that there are ways to alter this natural cycle. If you put a light in the chicken coop, to fool the chickens into thinking it's light twenty-four hours a day, they increase their productivity. Under such artificial constraints, they produce their egg every twenty-five hours, whether it is pitch black outside for twenty of those hours or not.

At Emery House, we decided that such an approach didn't seem fair to the chickens. For some reason or other, God created them to work in this very specific way. And if we tried to artificially stimulate them to produce eggs, it would be like us artificially stimulating ourselves to work overtime all the time. I have the feeling that God didn't make us for that kind of life either.

Yet because we humans are no longer solely dependent on the sun for light, we've been able to extend the day beyond what is natural or sustainable. For a lot of people, this means we've been able to extend the workday beyond what is natural or sustainable. One hundred and fifty years ago, when the Emery family lived on this land and farmed, they simply could not work for most of the year at 6:00 PM, 7:00 PM, 8:00 PM, not to mention 9:00 or 10:00 at night. Now, I want to be clear that I'm all in favor of electricity. It has changed our lives mostly for the good. But it's also contributed to the temptation we experience to live an unbalanced life. We've pushed the boundaries of day and night beyond their natural elasticity – a natural elasticity that was put there as a boundary, for our own good.

Taking a lesson from the chickens and their relationship to the hours of daylight, we see that, just as the chickens need a break from egg laying – it's built into their makeup – so too, do we need a break from our labors. Even God chose to rest! “And on the seventh day, God rested” (Genesis 2:2). So we need a rest at the end of each day, as well as weekly, on the Sabbath, and even yearly, with an annual holiday or a retreat to recharge. Lessons in time management might seem to be of human design – after all we're the ones with schedules and work calendars to follow – but the proof comes to us directly from the natural world. Our need to rest is retaught to us with each sunset. The creation points the way to the rhythm that is natural to us.

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As monastics, we Brothers are committed to seeking balance in our lives and helping others to discover the natural rhythms that will enable them to thrive. This desire is at the heart of what it means to us to be monks. People who encounter our community for the first time are often shocked to learn how ordered the Brothers' lives are. Even novices in our community often comment that one of the things that most surprises them is how every hour is scheduled – even the rest hours – and every activity, work, and play, has its place in

the monastic day.

We live in this ordered way in the hopes of finding a more natural, life-giving rhythm for our day than what we might do if left to our own devices. God, the Chief Gardener of our souls, is responsible for nurturing our growth, but God also enlists our help. Although we cannot make ourselves grow, we can arrange the conditions of our lives for optimal growth. Just as a gardener provides the stakes and lattices on which plants can grow, so we put in place various spiritual disciplines and habits that support the young shoots growing toward fruitfulness in our souls.

Monastic spirituality has offered us a useful tool called a “Rule of Life,” which can help us create the necessary conditions for growth in our lives with God. The monastic movement began when holy men and women left the distractions and relentlessness of their busy lives to try to learn how to live more harmoniously – with God, themselves, one another, and with all of creation. They sought out wild places, places where they could be alone, or gather in small communities, so as to shape their lives more intentionally. To aid them in this endeavor, the early monastics began to draft “Rules” for their communities: written documents that set out how the community wanted to live. Our word “rule” derives from a Latin word, *regula*, which connotes not so much a system of rules or laws, but rather a way of regulating and regularizing our lives so that we can stay on the path we have set out for ourselves.

One of the most important early rules, the *Rule of Saint Benedict*, has inspired countless generations of monastic communities and individuals in the fifteen centuries since it first guided Benedict’s community at Monte Cassino. It might surprise you to see how little apparently “spiritual” teaching this Rule includes. The chapters detail topics like, “How the Night Office Is to Be Said in Summer Time,” “How They Are to Sleep,” “On the Weekly Servers in the Kitchen,” and “On the Daily Manual Labor” – not topics that would seem to skyrocket anyone toward spiritual enlightenment. But the goal of Benedict’s Rule is precisely to order the Brothers’ common life, to keep them in tune with God above them, the world around them, the people beside them, and the needs within them. This rhythm of life allows the soul to be true to itself, more loving toward others, and thus, to grow deeper in tune with God.

Discovering a life in tune, in harmony, in rhythm, in balance is the underlying goal for any Rule of Life. To borrow the words from the Catechism that open this article, a Rule explicitly aims to help us “to love, to create, to reason, and to live in harmony with creation and with God.”

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Two of my favorite things to grow are scarlet runner beans and morning glories. I love the deep red and purple of their flowers and the way they grow up their respective trellises,

twining themselves up the poles which give both stability and structure to the plants. This image of the trellis is an important monastic image, as the root words for “trellis” and “rule” are related. Both provide shape and strength to the thing they are supporting. This connection suggests a wonderful parallel, for a Rule of Life functions much like a garden trellis does to a growing plant: It aims to give stability, strength, and guidance, but never in a rigid way. After all, it wants to *foster* growth, not stunt it!

The support any one individual needs to thrive will be as unique as that individual is. Marjorie Thompson observes in her book, *Soul Feast*: “Tomatoes need stakes, and beans must attach themselves to suspended strings...Without support, these plants would collapse in a heap on the ground. . . . When it comes to spiritual growth, human beings are much like these plants. . . . We need structure in order to have enough space, air, and light to flourish. Structure gives us the freedom to grow as we are meant to” (*Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life*, Westminster John Knox: 2014, 149).

The structure a Rule provides aims ultimately at creating freedom, not control. Look at a rose trellis: The roses are all over the place, varied in their shape, color, and size. Yet without the support and strength of that trellis, the plant could never grow so wonderfully beautiful, unruly, and unique.

So when we Brothers talk about living by a Rule – as we’ll be doing this Lent in the series Growing a Rule of Life – we mean something more like a trellis than a law code, a system very dynamic and fluid and flexible. A Rule describes a rhythm of living – a rhythm that gives life, much as the varied and beautiful rhythm of sunset and sunrise gives shape to the day. What sort of organic rhythm, which grows out of your life, would give you more life?

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Over the last few years, as we Brothers have been deepening our connection with the property at Emery House – working the land to grow food, conserving the land to restore native habitats – we’ve come to appreciate more and more just how fundamental our connection to the creation is to our lives as monks and our wholeness as human beings. We believe that living in rhythm with nature, by the structure of a Rule, helps each of us to grow into that vibrant life the Gardener dreamed when we were created.

Our guests at Emery House have encouraged and inspired us in this direction, by sharing with us how their experiences of the creation at Emery House have opened their hearts to God. Working alongside us in the meadows, woods, and gardens, they’ve learned, as we have, that living in rhythm with nature is not all sunsets and lark song! Yet the hard work of tending the land has proven even more valuable, for those who’ve come to assist us as volunteers, than simply relaxing in the refreshing air. Last year, I had a guest cleaning garlic for me. He was sitting out in one of the Adirondack chairs, working away. At one point I

came by and said to him, “Thank you for doing that.” And I’ll always remember his response. He said, “Oh, no, thank you. This is the first time in a year I’ve gotten my hands dirty.”

This is what we need: We need to get our hands dirty. We need to be physically in touch with the creation. We need to get reconnected to nature, in a place that isn’t just manicured lawns or city parks bordered by skyscrapers. We need to experience the good ache of using our bodies in fresh air. We need honest sweat.

I think we need this because, ultimately, it reminds us who we are, that fundamental identity the Catechism defines as “part of God’s creation.” The creation connects us with the Creator. It grounds us in the living rhythms of which we are a part. We remember not just that we have a body, but that we are a body – a working, interdependent, natural, physical miracle that God made. “For you yourself created my inmost parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I will thank you because I am marvelously made...” (Psalm 139:12).

We need to live in rhythm with nature because we are nature. We’re not over and above or outside of nature; we’re part of nature, we’re part of the whole ecosystem. When we live in rhythm with nature, we take our place as one part of this magnificent whole that God has made. Our own restoration is fundamentally linked with the preservation and restoration of the natural world we inhabit and of which we ourselves are a part.

As we strive to live in rhythm – as God intends us to live – we feel ourselves called into the woods, the desert wastes, beside the running waters, under the deep blue sky. We respond to the deep fellowship with nature that the Spirit urges, and which is a fundamental part of our humanity. We learn from the natural world the rhythms by which we can live richer, more human and humane lives. And when we begin to heed these rhythms, in the words of early SSJE member Father Congreve, then the Creation “shall become a living and personal word revealing to each of us the heart of God.”

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In 1989 he came to the United States to test his vocation with the Society of Saint John the Evangelist, where he was life-professed in 1995. Br. James has served in a wide range of leadership posts in the Society, currently serving as the community’s Superior. During his time in the Society he has traveled widely in the United States, Canada, Great Britain, the Holy Land, and Africa, leading retreats and workshops, preaching, teaching, and offering spiritual direction. His personal interests include genealogy, the study and writing of icons, and beekeeping.

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