In the eighth Monastic Wisdom for Everyday Living article, Br. Geoffrey Tristram explores how Intercession brings us, and those for whom we pray, close to the heart of God.

Five of the newest members of the Fellowship of Saint John share their hopes for joining the FSJ and their experiences of keeping a rule of life.

Do you pray every day? Br. Jonathan Maury outlines the wide variety of ways we might pray daily.

Br. David Allen shares some favorite short prayers, with and without words.

Br. James Koester explains how and why we might want to pray with icons.

Recent SSJE intern, Rob Coulston, offers a historical and personal glimpse into the Daily Office.

How do you find your vocation? In an interview, Br. Curtis Almquist shares the story of his experience of discerning his call to SSJE.

Letter from the Superior | Voices of Friends | Recommended Reading List

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We would welcome hearing what you think of this issue of Cowley Magazine. Visit www.SSJE.org/cowleymagazine to share comments, ask questions, or see Cowley Magazine in color!

Cover photo:
The hymn board in the Monastery Chapel, ready to lead the congregation in each of the daily prayer offices.

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A Letter from the Superior

Geoffrey Tristram, SSJE

Dear Members of the Fellowship of Saint John and other Friends,

It was a great joy during the summer to receive three new men as novices in our community. The moving moment when they put on the habit for the first time marks the beginning for them of what our Rule describes as “a time of progressive initiation into the life of the community.” We Brothers sometimes describe the process of learning to live in community as being rather like learning the steps of a dance. I like this image because the early Church Fathers used to describe God as dancing! They said that God was in essence a community of persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, engaged in an eternal dance, a perichoresis, of reciprocal, self-giving love. The wonder of the Incarnation is that God sent the Son to take on human flesh, to live among us, and to invite us to ‘come home’ and join in the dance! It is this image of God which is expressed in the famous icon of the Trinity by the great Russian painter Andrei Rublev (see page 22 in this Cowley). It is an image which transformed how I understand the doctrine of the Trinity, but more importantly, it transformed how I pray.

Prayer is the theme of this edition of Cowley, and the various articles offer insights that I hope may help to transform your own life of prayer. There are reflections on different ways to pray; praying with the Jesus Prayer, with icons, and the Daily Office, as well as a longer consideration of intercessory prayer. These are just some of the rich resources to draw upon from our Christian heritage, ways in which God invites us to be drawn ever deeper into God’s love. These beautiful words of St. Augustine express it so well: “To fall in love with God is the greatest romance; to seek God the greatest adventure; to find God the greatest human achievement.”

God has answered our prayers in remarkable ways over these past months. As well as our new novices, we have several other men in active
discernment and who may join us, God willing, over the coming months. This fall we are looking forward to the arrival of three new interns at the Monastery as well as a series of residents who will live alongside the Brothers at Emery House. We have also been blessed by the many friends who have volunteered to help us in re-cataloging our monastic library and in caring for the gardens at Emery House.

Throughout the fall we will also be continuing our ‘First Tuesdays.’ After the 5:30 Eucharist on the first Tuesday of each month, we invite the congregation down into the undercroft to enjoy a soup supper and conversation. This is part of our outreach to the young adult community of Boston.

In the coming year we are planning to offer five more of our very popular one-day workshops at the Monastery. Each workshop focuses on the Gifts of God: gifts of vocation, intercessory prayer, hope, meditative prayer, and compassion. Please see the website for further details.

Our website has been a remarkable way of keeping in touch with friends throughout the world. At General Convention in Indianapolis, it was a real joy to meet so many from every part of the country who expressed their thanks for our online ministries, especially “Brother, Give Us a Word” and our Lenten video series “Framework for Freedom,” on keeping a rule of life. In August we were very pleased to be featured in a New York Times article entitled “A Refuge Silent Enough to Hear God’s Whisper,” which can be accessed on our website.

We Brothers give thanks every day for all of you who support and share in our life and ministry, and we remember you in our prayers. It is prayer which undergirds our whole life. We are always very happy to receive your specific prayer requests, which we place on our intercessions board, and then lift up to God in our worship. We also love to know that you are praying for us. It is a huge encouragement and blessing for us.

Faithfully,

Geoffrey Tristram SSJE
Superior

TJ Tetzlaff (left) and John Saunders were Residents at Emery House this past summer, and a great blessing for the Brothers and guests alike.
The task of constructing and then trying to actually implement a rule of life throughout my FSJ probationary period brought with it some unexpected challenges for me and some insights into how spiritual life really works. Looking back, I think that what initially attracted me to the Fellowship was the idea that I might be able to transplant – through commitment to the Fellowship and a rule – a more real sense of the spiritual solidity, regularity, and comforting predictability of the life of the Society of Saint John the Evangelist into my sometimes-scattered everyday world. So in 2010 I wrote my letter of intent and began my probationary period. Shortly thereafter I also began a very intensive graduate program in an effort to advance my professional career. Under the pressure, strain, and upheaval of graduate school, my spiritual practice – built upon what I thought was a realistic and totally attainable adaptation of the FSJ Rule – fell utterly apart. I had such a sense of failure that I actually turned down my first invitation to be received into the Fellowship. I felt that it would be somehow disingenuous to make the public commitment without having been able adequately to keep to my rule.

I didn’t want to abandon the whole project, however, so I asked that my probationary period be extended (in the end it turned out to be almost two years long). I rehabilitated my spiritual practice and, shortly thereafter, was faced with the even graver life challenges that come at the end of graduate school – i.e., finding a job and restarting a career. My spiritual practice began to break down again and was pretty much stalled on the side of the road when I got the second invitation from the Society to be received into the Fellowship. I hesitated for days, trying to decide what to do, and then it hit me. I suddenly saw that, if I waited until I had perfectly fulfilled every last letter of my rule, then the day on which I felt comfortable making my commitment to the Fellowship would never come. Also, if I had a perfect spiritual practice, I wouldn’t really have much need for the support of the Fellowship and the structure of a rule, would I? So reception turned out to be the beginning, not the end, and the rule was really the horizon, or the ideal to be striven for, not a set of prerequisites that had to be fulfilled before life could move forward. As things stand now, after being received into the Fellowship, following my rule continues to be a challenge, with good days and bad days. But that, I’m finding, seems to be the true nature of the work.
In the fall of 2009 I came to a deepened experience of who the Brothers are and the gifts they have to offer the world. I am a part-time Master of Divinity student at Bangor Theological Seminary in Portland, ME and along with several other Episcopal students from the seminary, spent time in retreat at the Monastery – from Friday evening through Sunday afternoon. We joined the Brothers in worship – no fewer than ten times! – and for meals, for group reflection with our companion, Br. James Koester, and much time was available for silence – God’s first language. It was during the retreat I purchased a copy of the SSJE Rule of Life, and I must confess, prior to this year, I hadn’t given it much time or attention.

My wife Christine and I have been able to join the Brothers for several of their Saturday workshops. We always leave feeling renewed – eagerly anticipating a return visit. Early on in our time as a couple we desired a deepened relationship with the Brothers, and membership in FSJ seemed the natural path to follow. We read the Fellowship rule and saw ourselves already living into parts of it, so we applied as probationers.

As Lent approached this year, Christine and I learned of the Brothers’ video series, A Framework for Freedom. It has become part of our life together to pray Morning Prayer each day, and we chose to open our prayer time with the Brothers’ daily video offering. We quickly realized the value of a rule and how a rule does not have to be a burden, but rather can be something freeing and life-giving. At the same time, another dimension of our life during Lent was to choose a devotional book to companion us on our Lenten journey, so it seemed natural to use the SSJE Rule of Life and read a chapter near the end of each day. These two practices left us embraced by and wrapped in the hearts and words of the Brothers.

It strengthens and sustains us to know we are now part of the Brothers’ prayers, and our daily prayer now includes the Brothers. Each day we ask “that by their prayer and service they may enrich your Church, and by their life and worship may glorify your Name . . . ”

In the final reflection from A Framework for Freedom, Br. Curtis asked us to say “yes” to our lives and reminded us that God is most present in the here and now. I whole-heartedly believe that my “yes” to relationship with the Brothers and to the wider Fellowship will be a source of joy and gladness for the rest of my days.

The SSJE Monastery has long been a part of my landscape – mysterious, intriguing, and intimidating. As
a teenage spiritual-seeker, I passed by on my way to Harvard Square to listen to the chanting Hare Krishnas, sign petitions for social justice, give to the homeless, and buy books on Buddhism and Beatniks. The Monastery only got a passing glance and from what I knew about Christianity, it did not seem like an option for me.

Years later my husband, Charlie, introduced me to the Episcopal Church and the Christian faith. Now I find that much of my spiritual life and faith formation happens at that same Monastery that I so often passed by. When I first entered the Chapel it was with a new view of Christianity, far from what society had presented. My mind was eager to learn and my heart was ready to be wrenched open and filled with the love of God. Charlie and I have attended many workshops and worship services at SSJE. We listen to sermons on the website, read the daily “Brother, Give Us a Word”, and made the Lenten video series on creating a rule of life part of our daily prayer.

In the presence of the Brothers my sand settles, and my water becomes clear. Their offerings transform me daily, opening my eyes to a new way of being in the world, often turning my picture completely upside down, revealing the image as God actually painted it, a much more beautiful composition! Their hospitality has brought me a greater comfort than I have ever felt before.

By joining the FSJ I hope to deepen my relationship with the Brothers and other Fellowship members. Becoming intentional about following a rule of life is a natural next step for me on my spiritual journey. With so many choices of paths, the Fellowship is for me a way to make a decision on a direction so that I don’t stand bewildered at the crossroads, but move along, the boundaries allowing me the freedom to take in the scenery and the adventure ahead.

“Anyone who tries self-sufficiency in the spiritual life falls prey to illusion.” This sentence in Chapter 30 of the SSJE Rule of Life both invited and guided me in the construction of my personal rule. I knew that I needed and wanted observations, perceptions, and self-awareness. Being a guest at the Monastery and having visits with Br. Eldridge Pendleton led me to conclude that a deeper relationship with SSJE would be an appropriate path. The act of being received into the Fellowship of Saint John came to me as a gift – worthy examples of prayer, study, contemplation, community, care, and thankfulness. Writing a personal rule, then, led me to the Fellowship of Saint John.

Saint John’s Day 2012 had so great a symbolic importance for me that I wanted to remember and recall every detail about it. The morning was damp and chilly; the light and flowers in the Chapel were lovely; there was a festive reception; but for me, the important perceptions included anticipation, a change in the air, some new practical
Letters from the Fellowship

Gerone Lockhart

A t the moment, my life seems to be in a sort of liminal space, marked by an internal disquiet that promises either change or despair. What I can say about my experience of keeping a rule is this: the experience of keeping a rule, but more importantly the experience of knowing SSJE as they keep their rule, is serving as an anchor for me.

As I look to the future and as my life is being reshaped, I ask: What do I desire most? How will I orient my life in a way that is at least as compelling to me as the witness of SSJE? A part of me that feigns to be wise shouts that this standard is too unsparing, too absolute. And to these loud voices I respond: This is the way that I tether myself to life in unsteady times. My ability to reshape my life in the image of my fears is much too great to move through these days without an anchor.

The Fellowship of Saint John is comprised of nearly 1,000 men and women throughout the world who desire to live their Christian life in special association with the Society of Saint John the Evangelist. Members of the Fellowship seek to live an ordered life of prayer and service in association with the Society, and follow a Rule of Life which expresses a common commitment to faithful discipleship.

To learn about the FSJ, visit www.SSJE.org/fsj or contact us at friends@ssje.org.
I don’t actually remember a time in my life when I didn’t have an awareness of God as the creator and source of being. A desire to be in relationship with this God seems always to have been in me. In addition to taking us regularly to church, our parents encouraged my two younger brothers and me to pray before bedtime using the traditional, “Now I lay me down to sleep.” They also invited us to add our own prayers for particular people as we felt a need, so a spontaneous and affective aspect to prayer developed in me somewhat naturally. But I first became conscious of having an active prayer life – realized that I was speaking to God and hearing God’s voice – when I was an adolescent. Keeping very much to myself in those days, I often took long bicycle rides around Nantucket Island. I’d stop on the moors or at the beach to commune with God, sometimes with words and sometimes without. The Rule of the Society of Saint John the Evangelist expresses what I grew to know in those years with these words from Chapter 27: “The gift of silence we seek to cherish is chiefly that of adoring love for the mystery of God.” From a very early age, I felt and sought this mystery.

Though the particulars of experience will differ for each person as an individual image and likeness of God, I have come to believe that all human beings instinctively desire to seek and know God, and that God is drawing each of us into relationship through the Spirit’s gift of prayer. At the same time, I also know the human tendency to shy away from, even resist out of fear, the loving intimacy of and with God which is prayer. This paradoxical tension is articulated in Chapter 21 of our Rule, on “The Mystery of Prayer”: “There are many conflicts on the way into the experience of divine love… a deep wound to our humanity… hinders us all from accepting love. As the Spirit exposes it to Christ’s healing touch in prayer, we shall often have to struggle with our reluctance to be loved so deeply by God.” Just as the innate desire to be present to and with God has a unique character in each person, so does this wound, too, take a particular form in each of us. Even as our created nature impels us toward God, this primeval wound also causes us to resist being loved by God as deeply as we begin to perceive God loves us. The opening lines of Francis Thompson’s “The Hound of Heaven” vividly portray the internal conflicting emotions of yearning and fear:
I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;  
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;  
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways  
Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears  
I hid from Him, and under running laughter.

Up vistaed hopes I sped; And shot, precipitated,  
Adown Titanic glooms of chasmed fears,  
From those strong Feet that followed,  
Followed after.  
But with unhurrying chase, and unperturbèd pace,  
Deliberate speed, majestic instancy  
They beat – and a Voice beat  
More instant than the Feet –  
“All things betray thee, who betrayest Me.”

We flee and yet wish to be captured; we fear being what we most desire. We seek to know God and desire relationship with God, while shying away and disqualifying ourselves as unworthy of God’s embrace, of the integration and wholeness found only in divine Love. At the point of encounter with God, we draw back, fearing the cost of – and yet yearning for – the transformation by which we may be made whole.

Jesus’ encounter at the Pool of Bethesda with a man who has lain there ill for thirty-eight years (John 5:1-18) is, for me, a paradigm of God’s unwavering pursuit of relationship with each one of us. Jesus approaches this man as someone who has already come to know him better than any other. And so Jesus’ first words are a question which cuts to the heart of the sick man’s predicament: “Do you want to be made well?” The man’s response is, to my ears, a litany of complaints and reasons why this hasn’t happened (and perhaps can’t happen): “I’ve been here all these years, waiting for the healing waters to stir; but when they do there’s no one to help me get there, and someone else gets there first…” It is as though the man is saying, Well, that might be a wonderful thing, but there are all sorts of reasons why this can’t (or shouldn’t) happen for poor me. The Lord seems, nonetheless, to hear not the man’s words, but the thoughts of his heart. “Stand up, take your mat and walk.” And the man does, thus giving his unspoken “Yes” to God.

Each of us, too, wants to “be made well” at the core of our God-given being. In spite of our reluctances, evasions, and sins, each human being deeply wants the health and wholeness that is possible only in the relationship with God which we call prayer. I speak of the prayer which is known in the simplicity of being present to Presence, just as God, Presence, is always so to us. All the diverse forms
of prayer we might attempt – repetitive prayer, contemplative prayer, corporate prayer (and others surveyed at the end of this article) – have their root in the simple act of unselfconsciously being with God. Even when we “give up” on prayer or say we “can’t” pray, we do so having already been drawn by and known by this Presence. The Mystery who we call God has not left us, and is seeking us still, calling us to more authentic self and relationship. Any desire to pray, however feeble, and every attempt at prayer, however halting, is prayer, for it is always God reaching out to us. Every prayer, every desire, even our resistance is, in reality, our response to God’s kindling of yearning within us, in response to God’s own. We may seek to repress that desire, or try to shield or distract ourselves from it. But our flight in fear of unworthiness, in resistance, even in our turning elsewhere for meaning in life, God uses to draw us ever closer and deeper into the embrace of divine Love.

So what do I do to know and receive the prayer I need this day, the prayer which the Spirit is giving me this day? Show up. Show up. To paraphrase Woody Allen, “90% of prayer is just showing up.” Enter into your daily prayer with the assurance that God is already there. If you’re showing up and giving yourself over to God during this time, then whatever happens is the Spirit’s gift of prayer for you today. Sometimes you may be drawn to meditating on Scripture or to “sitting” with an image or word, to intercession or spontaneous petition, even to contemplative prayer and a wordless silence. At other times, we will experience distraction, which at
its root is our resistance or shying away from what is being given to us. It may not feel comfortable, may even be painful, because it’s not what we were expecting or wanting to happen, but it is the prayer which God is giving us this day. If you feel even the feeblest desire to desire to pray, you already have received a gift of prayer. For that fleeting wish is God stirring your heart, kindling your soul with God’s desire for deeper relationship with you.

God gives us the prayer we need. Each day it will be the prayer for this season of our life. We receive each day, at each moment, what is best for us. God gives us what we truly need rather than what we think we need, and prepares us for the next thing gradually, according to our present capacity to receive. We can find an authentic peace in accepting the given-ness of prayer, even though what we are given is not what we may wish, even when what we receive disturbs us. Whenever our experience of prayer feels dry, dull or disappointing, the simple act of “showing up” day by day is, in truth, the opening of our hearts to God, by God. Even when we are not consciously praying or are avoiding prayer, still we are responding to the presence of God’s Spirit, deep within. Whenever we respond to love, to need, or to beauty, we are always responding to the Love, the Voice, and the Presence of God within us. We are being made whole by God – in our showing up, our being attracted or repulsed – however we may be seeking the silence “of adoring love for the mystery of God.” God is not giving up on us. Let God give you the gift of prayer you need this day.

"Enter into your daily prayer with the assurance that God is already there."
A FEW OF BR. JONATHAN’S FAVORITE PRAYER CORNER RESOURCES

The Hymnal 1982
From my first days as a junior chorister, the church’s hymns have been a source of sung devotion for me. Hymn 698, “Eternal Spirit of the living Christ,” which I frequently use to begin a time of prayer, also inspired this article.

Prayers and Meditations of St. Anselm; ed. Sr. Benedicta Ward, SLG
Saturated with the vocabulary of the Psalms, Anselm’s prayers often move me into a place of deep affectivity. In his prayer to St. Mary Magdalene, he asks “my most dear Jesus” for the “bread of tears” in order to come to the “everlasting sight of your glory.”

The paintings of El Greco (Domenikos Theotokopoulos)
This native of Crete was a writer of icons in the Orthodox tradition and later influenced by Venetian painting. Meditating on the beauty of this artist’s Crucifixion and Resurrection (among many other works) moves me toward contemplative prayer.

The poems of Rabindranath Tagore
This Bengali poet’s lyrics speak to me about the “living God within” in an almost Christological sense. A favorite line: “O master poet, I have sat down at thy feet. Only let me make my life simple and straight, like a flute of reed for thee to fill with music.”

Devotional gifts from family and friends
A varied range of small objects, handmade or from nature, move me to prayer of gratitude, intercession, petition and, often, repentance.
What Prayer is God Inviting You to Today?

Intercessory prayer • Keep a list or notebook of individuals and concerns. You might invite yourself to pray through the list over a set amount of time (once each week, each month, etc.), or allow the list to spur you to spontaneous prayer for the concern most lifting off the page for you at that time.

Repetitive prayer • You might use repetitive prayer – spoken along a ring of prayer beads, or to the pattern of your breath – as a way to prepare yourself for spontaneous prayer, or simply for your whole time of prayer. Choose a verse or two from the Psalms; pray the Jesus Prayer, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, have mercy on me, a sinner”; or speak the name of Jesus.

Contemplative prayer • Sometimes we want simply to be in the presence of God. You might light a candle, gaze at an icon, or focus on your breath, to help still your mind and make you aware of God’s presence. Free yourself from language, and simply sit in the presence of the Holy One.

Embodied prayer • Do you do yoga, stretch, or enjoy taking long walks? Try praying with your body: Pray in the orans position, or make the sign of the cross; do prostrations to the phrases of a short prayer. Allow the movement of your limbs to punctuate and pattern your prayer to the God who formed you in your mother’s womb.

Lectio divina or meditation on scripture • Allow the Scriptures to inspire your prayer. Choose a short passage of Scripture, perhaps one of the readings appointed for that day, and read it through very slowly. What words or images jump out at you? Allow that scene or that phrase to become the focus of your prayer.

Praying with art • Know that God can take many things – not just formal icons – and infuse them with sacredness, making them sources of revelation for us. Go to a gallery or museum at an off-time, and allow yourself to sit with the work of art that is most speaking to you, praying to God through that object. Or take a book of sacred paintings out of the library and allow one of the images to focus your prayer. How does this image invite you to pray?

Journaling • It’s not possible for anyone of us to have encompassed the mystery of God; we can barely encompass the mystery of ourselves. Journaling about past experiences, about doubts and questions, about our daily life, can open us up to aspects of our own experience and personality that we may not otherwise be able to know, and that can help to reveal to us the graces and will of God in our daily life.

Prayers of place – Burning bushes can appear in many places. God often comes to us veiled, so that we can approach without being overwhelmed. You might try spending time with God in a place of great, moderate, or little beauty, and see how it inflects your prayer. To what prayer does God invite you on a beach, in the mountains, in the city?
**Write a letter to God** • Sometimes we can silence or censor ourselves in prayer. What have you kept unsaid in your relationship with God? Slowing down, taking pen in hand, can help us to open our hearts to God. Try writing God a letter, as honestly as you can, sharing with God your deepest hopes and fears, your innermost thoughts.

**Prayer with others** • The generous and listening heart of another often helps us to be able to understand experiences of revelation in prayer, whether the friend helps us to articulate them in words, or to know them wordlessly on a level of feeling and trust. Talking with one or others who are at a similar place in their experience is a way of authenticating our prayer experiences. It’s also a way of approaching the Ineffable, the Inexpressible, through the patient act of listening. Try praying with a close friend, in silence or with words; and try talking about your experiences of prayer together.

**Distraction as prayer** • Rather than struggling against distraction, return in prayer to those places where you repeatedly experience distraction or disruption, and ask simply, “What is it that you desire to give me?” Over time, by returning to prayer, even with its distractions, our unnecessary defenses and resistances can be broken down. Ask God to give you the help you need to stay faithful to your daily prayer.

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**We invite you to pray in our Monastery Chapel or visit Emery House, our rural retreat center in West Newbury for a time of prayer. Visit www.SSJE.org/retreat.**
Pray Without Ceasing
An Invitation to Daily Prayer

David Allen, SSJE

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances.

– 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

The Acts of the Apostles tells us that soon after the Holy Spirit descended on the Apostles in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, three thousand persons were baptized and added to the Church. “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:41-42). Thus from the earliest days of Christianity, following the pattern already set by devout Jews, the practice of daily prayer was established. Later, when the Apostles began to go out on missionary journeys accompanied by believers, the gathering for “the breaking of bread” (the Holy Eucharist) came to be observed primarily on Sunday, the Lord’s Day. However there are indications that the practice of daily prayers continued on all days of the week. Paul’s words of encouragement near the end of his first letter to the Thessalonians, quoted above, give us an indication of the importance of daily prayer in those early times. Those same words have continued to be a rallying cry to Christians of all generations to persevere in daily prayer.

There are many ways of praying daily, including repetitive prayer using the Rosary or Scripture or one’s own words, spontaneous prayer, intercessory prayer, the Daily Office, as well as the monastic form of meditative prayer called Lectio Divina, which is an unhurried reading of a passage from Scripture, or from some other spiritual book, in which we let the words speak to us. Whatever approach you use, a sentence from the SSJE Rule of Life might be helpful: “Without silence words become empty” (SSJE Rule, Ch. 27).

One very famous repetitive prayer with which you might be familiar is the well-known “Jesus Prayer”: Jesus Christ, son of the living God, have mercy on me. This prayer has an interesting history relating to our Order. In the mid 1960s, Fr. John Sakurai, of the
Japanese Province of the SSJE, made a translation of the popular 19th century devotional manual, *The Pilgrim’s Way*, which he titled using the words from 1St Thessalonians in Japanese, “Taezu Inorinasai,” that is “Pray without ceasing.” The devotional manual tells of a Russian pilgrim who took those same words as his inspiration to practice the repetition of the Jesus Prayer as the foundation for his daily prayers. Over the years the manual has been published in Russian, English, Japanese, and many other languages. Thus the Jesus Prayer has been used as one form of daily prayer by many people. Repeated over and over, it takes on its own life subconsciously. If we pray the Jesus Prayer faithfully over time it takes on the rhythm of our breathing and heartbeat. Yet in *The Pilgrim’s Way* the reader is also warned to avoid repeating it in a strained way, as well as advised to have a spiritual director as a guide. I find, in my own practice, that I only use that prayer periodically, for example during quiet waiting times or as part of my prayer on a retreat day. When I was living in Japan some years ago, and since then, on subsequent visits, I found that riding on a train for some distance, if I had a seat that was relatively quiet, the Jesus Prayer would come to me with the rhythmic sound of the wheels of the train.

Even very short prayers can be helpful in our daily prayer. In his book *Toward God*, Michael Casey, an Australian Cistercian monk, offers the 4th century monk, John Cassian, and the anonymous 14th century author of the *Cloud of Unknowing*, as proponents of the importance of short prayers. One of the reasons Cassian favored short prayers was the belief (still held in those early days) that short prayers didn’t give demons time to get into one’s soul. With longer prayers, they might sneak in during the pauses. So too, *The Cloud of Unknowing* advocates the use of short words, preferably only one syllable, such as *God* or *love*, because the intent of prayer put into that word could the more easily penetrate the cloud separating us from God.

In my own experience, I’ve found that shorter prayers prayed frequently can be much more effective than longer prayers. As a small boy, from the age of about three or four, until twelve, I was exposed every Sunday to the long pastoral prayers that were part of Presbyterian worship in those days. Those long prayers were to me just times for drawing pictures in the margins of the bulletin. I was occasionally taken to Sunday Evensong at the Cathedral in Spokane, which was my mother’s parish. From those days forward, I came to appreciate the shorter prayers of the...
Episcopal Church. To this day, I find that when I offer prayer to God – the concerns that are on my heart, my contrition, my penitence, as well as the offering of praise and glory – shorter prayers of just a few words help me to concentrate and focus my prayer. I wonder what short prayer might focus your life with God today?

You might also focus your daily prayer around the patterns of the day. From the earliest times, the daily prayers used by Christians probably have included some form of greeting the new day in the early morning, asking God’s blessing on whatever is to be done in that new day. For noonday prayer, they perhaps included some form of thanksgiving for food at meals, before or after the noon meal. And finally, there was likely a form of evening prayers: at the end of the day, a final prayer of confession of sins, thanksgiving for the day’s blessings, and a commendation to God’s mercy before sleep. Throughout these set times, there might be prayers of intercession and petition for the sick and the needy. Some form of this daily pattern has undoubtedly been used by all devout Christians down through the ages of history.

Of course, while words can be useful in prayer, words are not necessary to prayer, nor do words alone make prayer. True prayer is opening oneself to God with love as a response to God’s love for us. Our Rule explains that prayer is not just saying words: “Our prayer is not merely communication with God; it is coming to know God by participation in [God’s] divine life” (SSJE Rule, Ch. 21). This is important to remember in regard to repetitive prayers like the Jesus Prayer and the Rosary. If we pray with the intention of offering our words to God in love, and in union with the prayers of many other people throughout the world, and perhaps in other languages (when I say the Jesus Prayer, and many other private prayers, I do so in Japanese), then we are participating in God’s divine life. And so we continue our prayer without ceasing to this day.

“Prayer is not just saying words.”
## Upcoming Workshops & Retreats

### Saturday Workshops

**Gifts from God**
A series of five workshops celebrating the gifts that God offers us will be held at the Monastery on Saturday mornings, from 9:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. Participants are invited to stay and join the Brothers for Noonday Prayer at 12:30 p.m.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Presenter</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>October 13</td>
<td>Discerning a Vocation</td>
<td>Br. David Vryhof</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 10</td>
<td>The Gift of Intercessory Prayer</td>
<td>Br. James Koester</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 8</td>
<td>The Gift of Hope</td>
<td>Br. Curtis Alquist</td>
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<tr>
<td>January 12</td>
<td>The Gift of Meditative Prayer</td>
<td>Br. Robert L'Esperance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 13</td>
<td>The Gift of Compassion</td>
<td>Br. Curtis Alquist</td>
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### Retreats at the Monastery

**First Time in Silent Retreat**
If you haven’t yet come on retreat with us because it’s new or daunting, this weekend is for you. Br. Luke Ditewig will gently usher you into the experience of silence and solitude, offering instructions and thoughtful meditations along the way, and suggesting ways you might experiment with prayer between sessions. The Brothers will welcome you to join them in worship and at meals.

**December 14-16 or March 1-3**

### Retreats at Emery House

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>September</td>
<td>One Foot in Eden</td>
<td>This weekend retreat at Emery House will offer times to ponder the image of the garden from Eden to Gethsemane to the Garden of the Tomb as well as times to work in the gardens around Emery House.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October</td>
<td>Living in the Real Present</td>
<td>This retreat will offer an experience of being really present to the real presence of Christ, now. We will draw on our senses, the cadence of poetry, music, and the gift of movement, for a weekend promising to be re-creative for the soul.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November</td>
<td>Waiting in the Dark</td>
<td>In our own lifetimes, an element of darkness never completely eludes us, as true about the sky as it is about the soul. We will consider how to live with questions, where to find the wellspring of hope.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January</td>
<td>For God Alone My Soul in Silence Waits</td>
<td>Amidst the tyranny of distractions and demands on our attention, Jesus comes knocking at the door of our soul. This weekend retreat will include teaching on quieting the heart, and on stillness and listening in prayer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January</td>
<td>Come Unto Me, All You Who Are Weary: Clergy Renewal Week</td>
<td>This retreat is to help ordained ministers find replenishment for what has been spent and encouragement for the future. The schedule will be very spacious, with time to rest, ponder, pray, savor your life, and reclaim the vocation to which Jesus has called you.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February</td>
<td>Contentment: Freedom Found within Limitation</td>
<td>Contentment is a spiritual grace, saying “yes” to what is. What is now is sufficient. Contentment is the channeling of the desire downwards – plumbing the depths – rather than outwards, endlessly surfing for more. We will explore what is enough.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For more information about these events, to register, or to see the retreats scheduled for March through May, visit www.SSJE.org/guest
Prayer, like love, is deeply personal because, like love, prayer is primarily about a relationship. We don’t fall in love with an idea but rather a person. In the same way, we don’t fall in prayer with an idea but rather God. As such, the modes of prayer into which people are drawn are different and varied. For some the way in which they can best experience and express their love of God is through their imagination and so they turn to Scripture and use their imagination to enter into the story through Ignatian Prayer. Others find a more contemplative approach, such as Lectio Divina, the way to feed their soul and nurture their relationship with the One whom they love. Some like to experience the grandeur of God in nature, and still others are drawn to the use of poetry or music as the way to kindle their affections and come to “feed on [God] in their hearts by faith with thanksgiving.”

One of the ways in which I have come to express my love and desire for God and to know God’s love for me is through art, color, and images. For a number of years I would pray with a photo book of quilts on my lap. I loved to gaze at the colors, the patterns and the designs of these magnificent examples of handwork and ponder the mystery of creativity and, through the creator of these quilts, come to know the Creator of all. In the same way, the language of icons has helped me to know and express God’s love for me and my love for God.

Now while a quilt or a flower, an article from nature or a candle can be iconographic, helping us to focus our attention and draw us into a world beyond the item itself, an icon does something a little different because an icon makes present that which it represents.

When I was a schoolboy, growing up in Canada in the 1960s every classroom had certain fixed features. Hanging somewhere in the room, and usually at the front over the blackboard, was a picture of Queen Elizabeth II and her husband Icons often enrich our shared worship in the Chapel.
Prince Philip, The Duke of Edinburgh. These pictures were not interesting pieces of artwork. They weren’t there to brighten the room or instill in us a sense of history although to a certain extent they did both. They were there to represent something, something beyond themselves.

On another wall, usually opposite the pictures of the Queen and the Duke, was a large map of the world. The dominant feature of this map was the color pink for every country that belonged to what was once the British Empire, and which had by the 1960s become the Commonwealth of Nations. So large swaths of Africa, parts of North, Central, and South America, many Pacific nations, bits of Asia, and many of the islands of the Caribbean were pink.

These two things – pictures of the monarch and her husband and the map of the world – were there to make present what they represented: a sense of identity and history, a sense of belonging to something much larger, and a notion of law or, as the Canadian Constitution puts it: “peace, order and good government,” which, the map showed us, we shared with other “pink” nations around the world.

In the same way, an icon makes present that which it represents. It is not simply a picture but rather a sign, indeed a “sacrament” of what it represents. This understanding of icons borrows from the realm of sacramental theology. Some might say, looking to the elements of the Eucharist, “That’s just bread and wine on the altar.” But as Anglicans we also know that’s not the whole story. Yes, it is bread and wine, but it’s not just bread and wine. The Catechism defines the sacraments as “an outward and visible sign of inward and spiritual grace.” In much the same way an icon is sacramental because an icon is an outward and visible sign of something inward and spiritual. It’s not just a picture or paint on a board. Rather, like those classroom pictures of the Queen, an icon makes present the figure it represents. This is not to say that Christ (or the saint) was not there before we brought the bread or the icon into the room, but now, suddenly, there is also a physical, tangible reality to that presence.
This sacramental reality is what makes an icon fundamentally different from other forms of religious art. Think, for example, of that sketch of Jesus that was so popular a few decades ago, The Laughing Christ. In the drawing, we see Jesus with his head thrown back in laughter. It’s a wonderful image from somebody’s imagination. Now, I’m not saying that Jesus never laughed; I’m not saying that Jesus didn’t look like that when he laughed; I’m simply saying that the purpose of that picture was to show what someone thought Jesus might have looked like laughing. An icon, on the other hand, is not an exercise of the imagination, but an exercise in representation: making present for us the person represented. Because of this subtle but important difference, an icon does not emerge from an artist’s imagination, but from their prayer. The iconographer is also attempting to express what the tradition of the Church says about Jesus and so an icon is an expression of Truth. For these reasons icons are not imaginative works.

Like praying with Scripture, while we absorb the text or the image through the eye, the primary experience of praying with an icon is through the heart. While we gaze at an icon with our eyes, we absorb its significance with our hearts and so the experience of praying with an icon will yield varied gifts for different individuals. When I lead retreat groups, I often use Rublev’s icon of the Trinity as a focus for prayer. I’ll start by pointing out several features of the icon, and then we’ll spend about twenty minutes in silence. It always turns out that each person has focused on different elements of the icon, and thus has experienced different prayer. Some focus on the empty place at the table, feeling themselves pulled into that empty place and finding a place in the community of the Trinity. Others will focus on the little house in the background and end up meditating on the hospitality of God and being welcomed into the home of God. Other people look at the three angelic figures and ponder what angels of the Lord have come into their lives and what messages they have brought. Just as any icon is an expression of the iconographer’s prayer, articulated within the confines of the Tradition, so too will prayer with an icon be an expression of the gazer’s own prayer and their relationship with God.

As in any relationship, there is always more to experience in an icon. Icons don’t “run out” or become so familiar that we have “used them up.” After all, we don’t look to icons for a factual picture of Jesus’ face or a realistic depiction of the Jordan river; if we did, we could move on once we’d gained the information we came seeking. Rather, we come to icons to encounter the Presence which they represent. And there is always more to experience in that relationship. There is always more to learn. There is always more to share.
How to Pray with Icons

Eyes  The first place to look in an icon is at the eyes. As you sit down with a particular icon, ask yourself the question, “Where is the icon’s gaze drawing me?” What’s the focus of the eyes in the icon? Are the eyes looking straight out at you? What do they ask you to consider? Are they looking beyond you? Might there be something outside of you or in your past that you need to consider through the eyes of the figure in the icon? What is the expression within them? What emotion does the gaze raise in you? In some icons, you’re invited simply to share a gaze with the icon just as two lovers would: Each looks at the other. Gazing and being gazed at in return can be an experience of being loved.

Hands  The other place that I suggest people begin is to look at the hands, because the hands also will lead you. Are the hands pointing to something? Often it appears in icons of the Virgin that she is pointing to or offering her Son to you. In icons of Jesus he is sometimes pointing to a text of Scripture or his hand is raised in blessing or teaching. If his hand is raised in blessing, receive the blessing. If his hand is raised to teach, ask what he might want or need to teach you.

Dialogue  Remember, you’re not praying to an icon. Rather, you’re praying with and through an icon. Say, for example, that you sit down to pray with an icon of the Beloved Disciple. You’re not praying to the Beloved Disciple, you are entering into a conversation with the Beloved Disciple and asking him, “What can you tell me? What can you teach me about being a Disciple of Jesus? What can you tell me about being beloved by Jesus? What was it like to be leaning on the breast of Jesus at the Last Supper? How can that be for me? How can I become a beloved disciple?” The icon becomes a chance for contact and conversation; it invites us into relationship. The icon of the Beloved Disciple isn’t simply a picture of John leaning on Jesus’ shoulder. It’s a representation of the real love that these two people had for each other. So praying with an icon of the Beloved Disciple is really praying about that kind of love, using it to help us pray for that kind of relationship with the Lord.
The Daily Office holds a special place in the Anglican and Episcopal tradition. From our founding in the religious and political upheaval of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation in Europe, daily prayer in the form of Morning and Evening Prayer has been one of our tradition’s main structural supports.

The first Book of Common Prayer was a revolution at the time it was published. By that time in the Church’s history, the number of books it took to celebrate the Offices had expanded dramatically. You needed a book with the prayers, a book with all the commemorations of the Saints for reference, a book with the listed readings, a Bible, and so on. To add to the weight of the books, they were expensive and in Latin. This was a time when there was not a lot of disposable money, and most people were not literate in their first language, much less in Latin. It was at least highly technical, and at worst exasperating, trying to celebrate the Offices liturgically. Then came the Book of Common Prayer. All of the materials one needed to liturgically mark the day with prayer were now in one volume. Add a Bible and you were ready for the Daily Office. Since 1549, the Daily Office has endured as a beloved piece of the Anglican ethos. That love and reverence were passed down from the Church of England to the Episcopal Church.

Historically, Morning and Evening Prayer were the primary acts of worship for Anglicans. Until the Oxford Movement in the nineteenth century, Morning Prayer was the principle service in almost all Churches in the Episcopal Church, and it was not until the liturgical revival of the early twentieth century that weekly Eucharists almost completely replaced Sunday Morning Prayer. Choral Evensong – especially as practiced in the Cathedral choir system of men and boys, later joined by women and girls – was, and in many places still is, a mainstay of devotion. The Daily Office was the foundation for generations of Episcopalians.

Yet, the importance of the Daily Office is not just historical. In the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer 1979, the high standing of daily prayer is made clear by its position in the book: On page 13, in a section titled “Concerning the Service of the Church,” we read that the Eucharist is the principle act of Christian worship on the Lord’s Day (that is, Sunday).
and, together with Daily Morning and Evening Prayer, these services are the “regular services appointed” for worship in this Church. Our Episcopal community proclaims that daily, liturgical prayer is of the same value as regular Eucharist. We consider the Daily Office so valuable that it is the first liturgy set forth in the BCP. Before Baptism, the Eucharist, Reconciliation, before anything, there is the Office. Rite One begins on page 37 and Rite Two on page 75. Our placement of the Daily Office shows that our commitment to a relationship with God in prayer is paramount.

We set daily prayer at the beginning of our relationship with God because we know relationships take work, and that includes our relationship with God. As a community gathered by God, through the person of Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, we set the Offices first as a way of commending to each other the practice of taking some time out of every day to be with God, to meet God, and to see God at work in the world around us.

We meet God in many ways in prayer, but there are three ways in which I see God most clearly during the Daily Office. The first two were brought to my attention in a book called *Liturgy for Living* from the Church Teaching Series, written by Charles Price and Louis Weil. The first way we meet God in the Office is face-to-face. By taking some time out of every day, and out of the every-day, I make room in a busy and crowded life to look for God. I become habituated to looking for the face of Christ in my neighbors, to finding ways I can serve a world in deep need with the hands of Christ, and I begin to love with the heart of Christ. I see the light of God in others, and the Psalmist reminds us that in God’s light we see light.

The second way I meet God in the Office is through the reading of Scripture. Through regular reading
of the Word of God, I begin to become obedient to the voice of God. I become obedient, not by simply doing what I’m told, but by getting to the root of the word *obedient*. It means “to listen deeply.” I stop hearing words and begin hearing God’s loving intention for my life. Even in the parts of Scripture that make me nervous or uncomfortable I can hear God calling me to be sensitive and discerning to the things that make me nervous and uncomfortable in my life. We begin to incarnate the Word of God to others.

The third place I see God most clearly in the Office is in those with whom I am celebrating the Offices. In my time at the Monastery as an intern, it became very clear to me that God joins us wherever we are in our day and in whoever is with us. At first I found encouragement in seeing the faces of the Brothers and the assembly that gathered to pray, but as I’ve prayed the Office alone on the Sabbath, on retreat, and since I left, I’ve found that I am still strengthened and encouraged even when I pray alone. I carry the community with me. I am in solidarity with others praying at the same time in different places. I am always joining my voice to that of the Communion of Saints, past, present, and yet to come. And they are always witnessing to me the Presence of God, active in my life and in our communal life. We are always together.

So I invite you to join in the practice of the Daily Office. Take some time out of the every-day. Take a little time to meet God where you are. Take a little time to bring God into the world and to bring the world into God. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us all evermore.
Voices of Friends

What do you love about SSJE? Who have the Brothers been in your life? We’d be delighted to hear about your experiences at the Monastery and Emery House.

Share your story at www.SSJE.org/voices, or email us at friends@ssje.org.

“As a Southern woman of many words, how refreshing it was for me to be a guest at the Monastery during our church’s recent Vestry retreat. The Brothers are wonderful and could not be more welcoming to us individually and as a group. It is one of the most beautiful and reverent places I have ever been. As the voices of the Brothers were heard at Holy Eucharist on Sunday morning in the Chapel, it was truly a lovely, transcendent experience for me. Thank you for your insightful and bountiful gifts to all of us.”

–Joan Miller, Amesbury, Massachusetts

Have you heard what our friends are saying about Brother, Give Us a Word?

“This is so beautiful. I am putting it on my wall of inspirations.” – John M.

“Thank you for your comforting and reassuring words. They have brought me some measure of peace as I struggle with the prospect of loss ahead.” – Allison C.

“This reading was a revelation to me. I appreciated getting jolted out of my comfort zone this morning.” – Frank O.

“Thank you for these most growth producing words. . . Please keep writing and teaching as long as you can.” – Mino S.

“Loved learning this in seminary, but needed to hear it again. Thank you.” – Mary M.

Brother, Give Us a Word is a short daily devotional text sent by email each morning.

Sign up now or share today’s Word with a friend who might need to hear it. www.SSJE.org/word
Support SSJE’s Annual Fund
Please Join the Friends of SSJE

Bill Kendrick and Polly Chatfield, co-chairs the SSJE Annual Fund

“T
his year has seen wonderful growth, change, and the return to normality following the restoration of the Monastery. Novices have been clothed, postulants are arriving, an intern program continues. Chapel services, workshops, and retreats have been resumed and are well-attended. The Brothers are doing what God has called them to do.

We can all show our love and rejoicing through our prayers and our financial support of their mission.”

Please consider becoming a Friend today by supporting the SSJE’s Annual Fund. A tax-deductible contribution may be made by check (payable to “SSJE”), credit card, direct deposit or a gift of securities. Gifts may also be made online through our website www.SSJE.org.

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Please specify “Society of Saint John the Evangelist, Boston” when making your gift.

Tax Receipts: After the end of each calendar year receipts will be sent for Chapel gifts made by check and for all pledge payments received.

And Tell a Friend about SSJE
Do you know someone who might wish to come on retreat, attend a workshop, visit the Monastery, or learn more about the Brothers’ life and ministry? We hope you’ll help us to share the Brothers’ good news with others. Invite a friend to visit www.SSJE.org or to subscribe to the Brothers’ daily email offering, “Brother, Give Us a Word.”
Desire, Belonging, and Finding the One

A conversation about vocation
with Br. Curtis Almquist

Q: When did you first have a sense of your vocation?
I was twelve and I had a dream – a dream about monks. After all these years, I can still picture what I saw in my mind’s eye. I have no recollection, at that point, of ever having met a monk, nor having been to a monastery; I wasn’t raised in a church tradition that would have brought me into contact with either. But I remember thinking, at age twelve, “I want to be a monk.”

Now, I also wanted to be a professional baseball player; a missionary surgeon; I was fascinated with garbage collection; I wanted to work for the FBI; I presumed I would be married, simply because that was the culture in which I grew up. My experience in this is not particularly unique, since it’s not unusual for people to try on ideas of who they want to be, what they want to do. But most people probably don’t have monk on their short list. Yet that thought about being a monk never left me.

But becoming a monk is not unlike becoming married: you don’t just open up the phone book, close your eyes, let your finger fall on a name, and say, “Okay, here’s the one.” There’s chemistry involved between an individual and a monastery, just as there is in dating, or in contemplating a life partnership with another person. So coming to a monastery is a very specific relationship. And I had never met “the one.” That is to say, I had never met the Monastery. I visited lots of monasteries for retreats – and there was always a kind of homecoming for me in that experience – but because I hadn’t as yet met the one, since the right fit had never come my way, I assumed that it wasn’t going to. I had come to the conclusion that this deep interest in monasticism was not a vocation; it was an avocation – an informing part of my life, and a very important one at that, but not my life’s calling.

Q: What changed that belief?
I met up with SSJE. I’d determined that if monasticism was ever to come my way, it couldn’t be in a cloistered monastery, where I was tucked away without an active ministry. I knew that I have enough energy and extroversion in my mix, my soul would suffocate in such an environment. But likewise, I knew that I couldn’t be something like a Franciscan friar, where I would be praying on my feet. I would burn out; I’d have a shelf life of about eighteen months. I knew I’d need something in the middle of those poles, but I’d never found it. When I met up with a Brother from SSJE while I was in seminary, for the very first time I thought, “Maybe this could be it,” because SSJE has a quite traditional, contemplative side – we pray the hours, we live under traditional monastic vows of poverty,
celibacy, and obedience – and we also have a very active ministry. Amazingly enough, SSJE’s balance was the very thing I was looking for. I hadn’t known it existed.

Q: So how did you follow-up on that spark of interest?
I made a visit to SSJE – a secretive visit. I didn’t tell the Novice Guardian that I had interest in the community or in a vocation. I didn’t want to put the spotlight on myself. That would feel like pressure. I just wanted to do some sniffing around on my own terms, to get a sense of who these Brothers were.

During that visit, I remember that the first service I attended was Evensong. I sat in the Chapel increasingly dazed. After Evensong, rather than going with the other guests to the Refectory for the evening meal, I went back to my room in the Guesthouse and closed the door. And I sat at the edge of my bed and wept. I wept because I thought, “After all of these years…” I was thirty-four, and I’d had that dream when I was twelve. Now I thought, “After all this time, maybe this is it.” I was crying because I was full of awe at what I’d just experienced, but also out of fear and dread, because I didn’t know if I’d have the courage and inner resolve to carry through with this exploration, or to speak with my family and other friends, whom I thought would greet this interest in a very discouraging way.

I didn’t know if anyone else in my entire life would understand this. So there I sat on the edge of my bed.

To be honest, I was half-hoping I would still be able to get this out of my system. I knew I needed to go home and take stock, which is exactly what I did. I was serving then in a parish in the Diocese of Chicago, and quite happily, but there was something missing – a sense of belonging and a context in which to belong. God has created us all with this need to belong. We see a beautiful picture of belonging in the Trinity: this interrelatedness of the Godhead, the community of God. I knew I had quite a deep need – in some ways an almost desperate need – to belong, the whole of me. Yet what was increasingly clear to me was a real paradox: as much as I needed to belong to someone, I also knew that marriage wouldn’t be enough, that one other person couldn’t be enough. Somehow or another, I knew this. And I suspect that there is some awareness of what I’ve just described in the common genes of monastics down through the centuries.

Q: After that first visit, how did you finally make the decision to come to SSJE? Was it a struggle for you?
I just woke up to it. It was like waking up with a kind of clarity: “This is it.” It wasn’t as if I had a piece of paper with a line drawn down the middle, with Xs on each side for the advantages and
disadvantages of coming. It was more like waking up to the rightness of this – the rightness of coming to test this desire out further. That’s the operative verb that’s used, down through the centuries, in the religious life: to test a vocation. The metaphor comes out of metallurgy. Testing is when metal is put into the fire to burn away the dross. The metal will either be completely consumed, because it is all dross – which can be painful and embarrassing, but clarifying – or conversely, the metal will be put into the fire, the dross will be burned away, and what is left is a truer form of what there was before. For me it was the latter.

I think of the process of discerning a vocation as God dropping these breadcrumbs on the path ahead, to lure us into places. I came freely and full of desire to be here. I very much came knocking at the door. Once inside the door, there’s an awakening of all the reasons – perhaps the real reasons – why God called us here. I had arrived at the Monastery with a few pairs of clothes and only a satchel of books – I’d traveled very lightly – but my soul was clogged with such an awful weight that I’d never imagined. I had a lot more stuff, especially around my identity and how I wanted myself to be perceived, than I’d ever realized. I was talking with a Brother some years later, about discovering that I had so much baggage. He said to me, “Curtis, that’s not baggage, that’s freight!” I became aware of this freight early into my time at SSJE. I was called into this monastic community in part to do that work of detachment and letting go. I couldn’t have known that before I came here (and if I had known, I probably wouldn’t have come). Yet I was called here because this is the place where I could be most real. Here I could become who I truly am. My calling here was about being really present to life – which is where God will be most present.

I can’t imagine any other way, any other context, in which my life could have unfolded. In that way I’m myopic. And we all are: we only know what we know. My experience is that nothing else would have been possible for me; yet I am also aware that I have made many mistakes in life; and I witness that other people have made mistakes in life. I would never want to imply that there is only one right way for each of us, and that if we don’t find it then it’s hopeless. There is also the reality of redemption. Discerning a vocation is just a beautiful manifestation of God’s waiting on us – waiting, in the sense of readiness, waiting for the fullness of time; but also waiting in the context of a waiter, stooping to meet us where we are. That’s how God meets us: where we are. Discerning a vocation is the reality of life being able to be retrieved, or restored, or recovered from all the mixed bag that is life. Sometimes we get it right, sometimes not. For me, this was the right way. But God waits on us to help us find that right way where we are, every moment.
Q: What would you say to someone who did not know what was the right way for them?

This is a burning question for many people: How do I find the right way? And how do I know if I’ve found it? Here are several things:

First, God has created us out of love and God is well apprised of what we are, who we are, how we are. While every relationship with God is intimately personal, it’s not private. In the Christian tradition, there has always been an understanding that the context in which we live and breathe and have our being, is community. So don’t assume that you can do this alone. We need help when it comes to finding our way, hearing our calling and claiming it. Ask those who know you to help you in discovering your calling.

Secondly, there’s an insight from Dom Sebastian Moore, an English Benedictine who taught at Boston College. He says: “Desire is not an emptiness longing to be filled; desire is a fullness longing to be in relationship. Desire is love trying to happen.” I believe that God lurks behind all of our desires for what we want to be and become. Our desires are the bread-crumbs: God’s way of luring us. So take your interests and desires – whatever you find compelling, intriguing – quite seriously. There is something going on in our interests and desires that needs to be unwrapped, probably with some help. But no matter how disconnected or crazy our thoughts or interests may seem, if we go deep enough to the ground of our being, we will find God as the initiator of that desire.

Finally, how do you know when you’ve found the right fit? There’s an old monastic insight, “Freedom is found in the context of limitation.” I think that, however good and right the fit may be, it’s never going to be so perfect that it will keep us off our knees. This life is *proleptic*: a taste of what’s to come. It’s a real experience, but it’s never the whole deal. By God’s grace, there will always be things that are not perfect, not complete, which keep our hearts broken open and our souls on our knees, lest we confuse this life with eternity. So no matter how right the fit is – and this life at SSJE has been just a huge grace for me – it’s never going to be completely complete. And there’s something graceful about that kind of inner vacuum. We are a reflection of God, made in God’s image, and we are longing after, thirsting for, desiring, hungering for God. That desire will never be completely sated in this life – however good our various fits are; however good our belonging is. There will always be the longing for something more. And God is behind that longing, too. God is always More.
Recommended Reading

Perhaps you’ll be inspired to check out one of these titles the Brothers have recently enjoyed?

• **Br. GeoffrEy TriStraM**

  *The Art of Travel* by Alain de Botton ~ A sparkling and very amusing book about why we like to travel, with lots of fascinating insights into human nature, and some great illustrations and pictures.

  *Company of Voices; daily prayer and the people of God* by George Guiver CR ~ A spiritual classic written by the Superior of the Community of the Resurrection, an Anglican religious community in Mirfield, England. It is a fascinating study of the practice of daily prayer throughout the Church’s history. It is down to earth and accessible, and full of help for anyone who finds prayer difficult.

• **Br. JaMes KoEstEr**

  *Esther: The Remarkable True Story of Esther Wheelwright, Puritan Child, Native Daughter, Mother Superior* by Julie Wheelwright ~ Esther Wheelwright was one of those New England colonists kidnapped during the French and Indian Wars of the 1700’s between the French of New France and the English of the Thirteen Colonies. Esther survived the journey to Quebec where she was adopted by an aboriginal family, converted to Roman Catholicism and became Mother Superior of the Ursuline Convent in Quebec. In 1759, at the time of the Conquest of Quebec by the British, Esther used her ability to navigate multiple worlds to help broker and build relationships between the French of Canada and the new English regime.

  *The Chicken Chronicles* by Alice Walker ~ Like me, Alice Walker has discovered the world of chickens and chicken coops and has put into words much of what I find so fun about keeping chickens (and now geese!).

• **Br. CurtiS AlmQuist**

  *Deeper than Words: Living the Apostle’s Creed* by David Steindl-Rast ~ Re-examines the words the early followers used to express their faith, hope, and love for Jesus. The Foreward, written by the Dalai Lama, and endorsements by such as Anne Lamott and Ken Wilbur, signals a fascinating read.

  *John Newton, from Disgrace to Amazing Grace* by Jonathan Aitken ~ Traces Newton’s tragic childhood formation, his debuchety in the 18th century slave trade, and his miraculous and ensuing repentance and life-long conversion. Newton eventually became an Anglican clergyman and author of the hymn, “Amazing Grace.”
Reynolds Price, the Collected Stories ~ With 50 of Price’s short gems, the book traces the heights of joy and pits of sorrow, laughter and tears all woven together. The reader can’t help but smell the bacon and hear the grasshoppers in these tales mostly coming out of the Deep South.

**BR. ELDRIDGE PENDLETON**

*Love Unknown* by Ruth Burrows, OCD ~ Burrows’ message is that if we want to be disciples of Jesus, not interested onlookers, we have to get used to uprooting quite a few habits of thought, and then reflects after a lifetime of spiritual experience on some of the most common ones.

*Bring Up the Bodies* by Hilary Mantel ~ The second installment of the dynastic upheaval caused by the marriages of Henry VIII during the English Reformation that brought about the establishment of Anglicanism. As was true of *Wolf Hall*, this is historical fiction writing at its best.

*Revelations* by Elaine Pagels ~ Offers a fascinating explanation of the meaning of the final book of the Christian Bible and suggests why theologians were reluctant to include it in the canon. Pagels then looks at other Revelations and related literature found at Nag Hammadi in 1945 to provide a glimpse of heterodox reading tastes at Egyptian monasteries during the 4th century CE.

**BR. DAVID VRYHOF**

*The Radical Christian Life* by Joan Chittister, OSB ~ According to Joan Chittister, a Benedictine nun, in these rapidly changing times when the world is facing so many serious challenges, we need a “new wisdom” and a “radical Christianity” to help us determine what we must be and do. In this book she offers daily bits of wisdom, drawn from monastic spirituality, to help us recognize and face the unique challenges of this age.

*Green Monasticism*, edited by Donald Mitchell and William Skudlarek, OSB ~ The essays that make up *Green Monasticism* are, for the most part, edited versions of talks given at a Buddhist/Catholic encounter entitled “Monasticism and the Environment” which was held at Gethsemani Abbey in Kentucky in May, 2008. Buddhist and Christian monastic perspectives are given on the looming ecological crisis, the world and our place in it, and contemporary consumerism and environmental practices.

*The Contemplative Heart*, by James Finley ~ James Finley, a former Trappist monk who was mentored by Thomas Merton, writes about “contemplative living,” showing us how to find and develop a contemplative practice and how to find support in contemplative communities.

**BR. MARK BROWN**

*House of Stone: A Memoir of Home, Family, and a Lost Middle East* by Anthony Shadid ~ The late Anthony Shadid, Pulitzer Prize winning correspondent for the *New York Times*, undertakes the renovation of his ancestral home in Marjayoun, Lebanon, a project that becomes the occasion for reflecting on his own family history as well as recent events in a very troubled part of the world.
Recommended Reading

Science and Religion in Quest of Truth by John Polkinghorne ~ Nuclear physicist, Anglican priest, and theologian John Polkinghorne explores the complementarity of Christian belief and scientific inquiry.

Freedom and the Arts: Essays on Music and Literature by Charles Rosen ~ Pianist, music critic, literary critic, and frequent contributor to New York Review of Books, Charles Rosen reflects on Western culture through the lens of literary and musical criticism.

Quantum Physics: A Beginner’s Guide by Alastair I.M. Rae ~ Tries his best to explain this to the uninitiated...

• Br. Jonathan Maury

Everything Belongs: the Gift of Contemplative Prayer by Richard Rohr ~ Our community’s hope to help people pray the whole of their lives is affirmed by this invitation “beyond the techniques of prayer to a place where we can...see the world in God clearly, and...that everything belongs.”

Ritualizing Nature: Renewing Christian Liturgy in a Time of Crisis by H. Paul Santmire ~ The SSJE Rule identifies our liturgical life as “a vital ministry.” This book posits the vital role of Christian ritual practices in enlivening human commitment to the ecological promise of God.

Toward Holy Ground: Spiritual Directions for the Second Half of Life by Margaret Guenther ~ The personal and ministerial insights of this work by a longtime SSJE friend are even more appreciated by this reader as he moves further in this new stage of life!

• Br. David Allen

The Road to Eternal Life: Reflections on the Prologue of Benedict’s Rule by Michael Casey ~ I have found this very useful in thinking about any rule of life.

Fragrant Palm Leaves: Journals 1962-66 by Thich Nhat Hahn ~ This is not a new book, in fact I am re-reading it. I find it works very well as reflections from a Buddhist Zen monk on nature, peace and freedom, life in general. I felt great peace coming through his writings in this book that harmonized well with Michael Casey’s book on the Prologue of Benedict’s Rule.

The Maizie Dobbs Series of Mysteries by Jacqueline Winspear ~ Br. Eldridge put me on to these books. The principal character in these stories is traced from her early teens to adulthood, from maid service to becoming a well educated, perceptive investigator, from the WW I period into 1930s England and France (so far in my reading). Maizie Dobbs always meditates, sitting reflectively as she ponders how to proceed with each “case.”

• Br. Luke Ditewig

Between Heaven and Mirth: Why Joy, Humor and Laughter are at the Heart of the Spiritual Life by James Martin, SJ ~ Excellent reflection for us all, even the not-so-funny types.

Still: Notes on a Mid-Faith Crisis by Lauren F. Winner ~ A hopeful testimony of struggle, waiting, and ever so slowly finding faith after great loss.