



# ENCLOSURE

*protecting what is precious*

Br. James Koester, SSJE

My parents would certainly never have used the word, nor thought that they were inculcating their children in a monastic practice, but growing up, my family lived to a certain extent by a rule of *enclosure*.

One of the ways we practiced this was that our bedrooms were off-limits to our friends. Bedrooms were not regarded as play areas, and we could not invite our friends into them. My family also had limits about when we could, and more importantly could not, watch TV. Once we sat down to dinner, the television was turned off. And then there were our rules around the telephone. If the phone rang during a meal, the caller was told that the person they wanted to speak to was not available and would they please call back later.

Now lest all of this make my parents sound like ogres, I assure you, they weren't. These boundaries were to protect what they believed to be important, even *holy*: namely, the daily ritual of an evening family meal. That time together was so important, it needed to be protected from anything which would interrupt it. From those boundaries, I learned a great deal about the sanctity of time, space, and relationships. While I could not have named it as such back then, I now realize that my parents were teaching me about the value of enclosure.

Enclosure is one of the essential practices that the monastic life has to offer the world today. Throughout the monastic tradition, enclosure exists both as a physical reality and as a spiritual principle. Physically speaking, the "enclosure" refers to that area within a monastery which is set aside,

into which only members of the community can enter. We do not welcome guests into our enclosure. We also aim to keep silence within it, at least at certain times. From such physical limits imposed on this set-apart space, we discern the *spiritual* principle of enclosure, which sees boundaries as a way of recognizing that things which are precious need to be protected. Monks practice enclosure not to block things out for the sake of blocking them out, but for the sake of allowing something holy to take root and grow. Monastic life itself is a sort of enclosure, into which we enter in order to focus on and foster our life with God.

I learned a lot about the importance of enclosure when we built a fence around the kitchen garden at Emery House, our rural monastery. It was one of those brilliant fall days a few years ago. A guest volunteered to help me plant garlic, and so we spent the day outside, digging, raking, and planting the bed of garlic, then covering it with straw to protect it from winter's frost. The geese were out that day, helping us. As we dug the bed, they would *help* by eating any roots or shoots they could find. I tried to shoo them away a few times, but soon gave up. I probably should have been better at shooing them. I should have locked them in their pen. It wasn't until the following spring that I discovered a number of gaps in the rows of garlic. It wasn't that the garlic hadn't grown; it was that the geese had eaten it!

I should have learned my lesson from the garlic, but I didn't. It took another year. A group of us had spent the morning laying out and planting peppers and tomatoes. When we returned after lunch, we discovered that the geese and ducks had devoured several of the plants, eating all the leaves and leaving only bare stems to show that something had once been there. The following spring, I had a fence put up around the kitchen garden.

That fence did a number of things. Most importantly, it kept the chickens and geese and ducks out of the garden. Finally, my vegetable plants were safe from being devoured by the poultry. By keeping some things *in* and other things *out*, the fence protected the garden. Yet the fence also did something else: it gave borders and definition to the garden. I now knew where the garden began and where it ended. In creating a border, the fence created a threshold. And that threshold changed my experience of the garden in subtle, yet significant ways. I knew when I stepped through the gate; I was entering a different space. The presence of that boundary made it easier for me to be fully *in* the garden.

All of us have parts of our lives that need protection for the simple reason that they are precious. If tomato plants and garlic bulbs need the help of a fence to grow, how much more do those precious, inner parts of our selves need to be protected from anything that would gobble them up? The tender shoots of prayer. The buds of creative inspiration. The not-yet-ripe fruits of love. Such precious things need room and time to grow. By setting up intentional boundaries on our space and limits on our time, we can create an *enclosure* that fosters those precious qualities and experience which the demands of life would otherwise devour.

For monastics, the thing we deem most precious and in need of protection – that *pearl of great price*<sup>1</sup> – is our life which is *hidden with Christ in God*.<sup>2</sup> Because this hidden life is so precious to us, we create and protect spaces and times in which we can be alone and undisturbed before God. We create boundaries around our prayer time through silence and solitude. We lay aside our work to pray together in the Chapel five times a day. And we even limit our accessibility to others and the world, so that we can focus on the one joy of our heart: to be truly present to God in Christ. In ways small and large, physical and spiritual, enclosure protects the heart of our life.

What about your own life? What boundaries might foster what is most precious to you? Could you, for instance, establish helpful limits around your use of technology? We all know how disturbing it is to have someone's cell phone go off in the middle of the Eucharist. Yet our time at home is equally holy and worth protecting. Have you ever had the experience of waking up in the middle of the night and thinking, *I wonder if I have any new emails?* and then not being able to go back to sleep because of something you have read? We can practice enclosure at home by acknowledging that sleep and rest are precious, and setting up concrete limits to protect them. It is not that checking my email is *unimportant*, but that my sleep is *more* important.

How about your relationships? Might they benefit from you creating limits around work or finding time in your calendar to play or setting aside intentional times just to be with those you love? Recall the feeling of annoyance that arises when your companion seems more interested in a conversation with Google than with you. Or what it feels like to be looked past, because

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1 Matthew 13: 45, 46

2 Colossians 3:3

what is on the television across the room has caught your friend's attention. We can practice enclosure by saying that our relationships with family and friends are precious, and by structuring our time and behaviors to reflect that truth. It is not that what I can find on Google or television is *uninteresting*, but that my relationships with my loved ones are *more* interesting.

Finally, I believe that all of us – in a monastery and outside one – need the help of enclosure to sanctify time and space for God. If we are always available to the urgency of email, phone calls, and text messages, to the demands of work, to the lure of entertainment, to the needs of those around us, we will probably never find the room to foster our relationship with God. We practice enclosure when we set aside time for prayer each day, perhaps even in a specific spot where we always pray (and only pray). It is not that there aren't a thousand other things I could spend that time doing — and many of them probably feel more pressing — but that I recognize how this time with God is the most vital thing of all.

What in your life is precious and needs to be protected? By practicing enclosure, you can help what is most precious to grow and thrive.

**Br. James Koester, SSJE**, was born in Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada. 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.

## QUOTES *to ponder*

"But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you."

– *Matthew 6:6*

"A monk is separated from all in order to be united to all."

– *Evagrius of Pontus, Chapters on Prayer*

"Dwell in the heart of Jesus. Ponder the mysteries which can be read in that sacred enclosure."

– *Richard Meux Benson*

"Enclosure sets right before our eyes the sole bounty that can fill our soul: God. We have already had a glimpse and a feel of His mystery when He touched our heart and called us to His service."

– *Monastère Sainte-Marie de la Garde*

"Your personal boundaries protect the inner core of your identity and your right to choices. There lives the dearest freshness deep-down things."

– *Gerard Manley Hopkins*

"Healthy boundaries are not walls. They are the gates and fences that allow you to enjoy the beauty of your own garden."

– *Lydia H. Hall*

"Daring to set boundaries is about having the courage to love ourselves, even when we risk disappointing others."

– *Brene Brown*

## PRACTICES *to try*

Establish helpful limits around your use of technology. Our smart phones and constant access to the internet can make it hard for us to be present in our lives, or to engage with others. Can you establish boundaries around your use of technology, which would encourage you to prioritize what truly matters? You might consider placing your phone in a drawer at home or at work, and only checking it at set times during the day. Or perhaps you could commit to placing your phone in “airplane mode” during meals with your loved ones. Whatever limits you establish, be intentional about setting them and keeping them. After a pre-determined amount of time, check in with yourself: Are you happier? Do you feel more connected? Adjust your habits as needed.

A small, simple Rule of Life can be very helpful in determining what is most precious to you and what limits could help you to further thrive. Try starting with an index card: Write down three things that are most important to you. What are you living for? What gets you out of bed in the morning? Then consider how you spend your time and resources. Could you shape your material circumstances to better prioritize and protect what is most precious to you?

## QUESTIONS *to consider*

What boundaries have you inherited or carried with you from early childhood? How do they continue to shape your identity today – for good or ill?

How have your boundaries changed over time? Have you experienced periods of rigidity, clarity, or laxness? Which made you feel most balanced and alive?

How might your relationships benefit if you were more strict – or conversely more free – about certain boundaries? Do you enforce limits that might keep others out? Or might you establish useful boundaries to help you invite others in?

## RESOURCES *to explore*

Caroline Westerhoff, *Good Fences: The Boundaries of Hospitality* (Cowley 1999).

Ruth Haley Barton, *Sacred Rhythms: Arranging Our Lives for Spiritual Transformation* (InterVarsity 2006).

Dennis Okholm, *Monk Habits for Everyday People: Benedictine Spirituality for Protestants* (Baker 2007).

## A PRAYER *for enclosure*

Yours is the day, O God, yours also the night;  
you established the moon and the sun.  
You fixed all the boundaries of the earth;  
you made both summer and winter.  
Thank you for the boundaries you set in our lives.  
Help us to create healthy limits for ourselves,  
and to honor those that allow others to thrive. Amen.

**The Brothers of SSJE** are a community of men giving our whole selves over to living the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Rooted in the ancient monastic traditions of prayer and community life, and critically engaged with contemporary culture, we seek to know and share an authentic experience of God's love and mercy. We live a common life shaped by worship, prayer, and our Rule of Life.

We invite you to learn more at [www.SSJE.org](http://www.SSJE.org)

