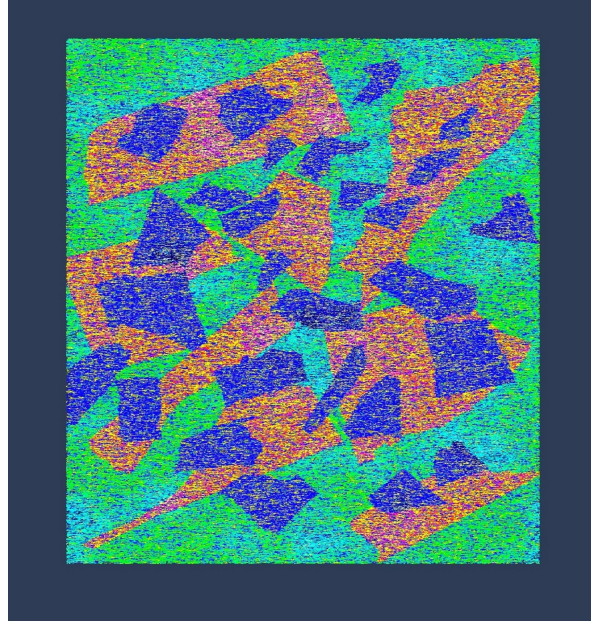


# *The Journal of the Lay Cistercians of Gethsemani Abbey*

Issue 1 - 2017



Introductory Note		2
Agape	Vicki Pettus	3
Through the Lens of the "Beloved": A Community Reflection on Henri Nouwen's Approach to Prayer	Ray Geers	4
Anniversary	Paul Quenon	11
Monkish Son: Chapter 1	Ray Geers	12
Nine Tailed Tiger	Paul Quenon	21
A Prayer for God's Help	Allen Thyssen	21
Mild January Eve	Paul Quenon	22
Report on the VII Meeting of the IALCC	Rebecca DiLoreto & Scott Gilliam	25
Call for Submissions		27

## Introductory Note

The stability of the monastic enclosure, combined with centuries of tradition, provides a structure and model for growth that offers support and guidance as well as rich resources for contemplation.

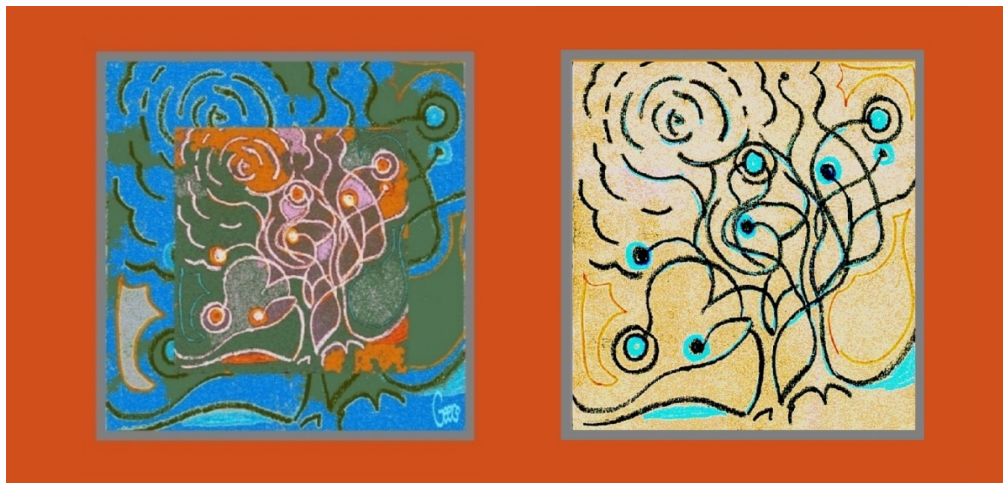
Non-cloistered contemplatives, however, face different challenges in respect to the environment and the companions with which their search for God takes place. Since they do not live within the walls of a monastic building, they must personally define a comparable place and fashion a practice of prayer, contemplation and spiritual companioning that complements their monastery-without-walls.

The primary purpose of this on-line publication is to contribute to the formation of such an enclosure. Ideally, the *Journal* is a context in which members and candidates explore and share aspects of their spiritual journeys and the role of the Cistercian charism and the monastery of Gethsemini in those journeys.

The *Journal* is open to different forms of reflection through original essays, poetry and other written narratives, as well as through paintings, sketches, photographs and video presentations. The *Journal* encourages scholarly submissions, as well. Monks of the Abbey are especially invited to submit their insights and studies.

This first issue includes poems by Brother Paul Quenon and Vicki Pettus, a prayer from Allen Thyssen, and two prose works by Ray Geers. Ray's essay on prayer in the work of Henri Nouwen uses a format for community discussion. In addition, the *Journal* features the first chapter of Ray's memoir in which he describes his experience as a novice at Gethsemani. Finally, a report by Rebecca DiLoretto and Scott Gilliam on this year's meeting of the International Association of Lay Cistercian Community offers a detailed overview of some of the structural and philosophical issues involved in the administration of the Lay Cistercian communities.

Bill Felker, Editorial Coordinator



## Agape

relentless  
wrestling romance  
in higher places,  
in dreams  
ever faithful  
embracing hope  
through faint images  
of forever  
I weep passion;  
I laugh love.

Vicki Pettus 2016



**Through the Lens of the "Beloved":  
A Community Reflection on Henri Nouwen's  
Approach to Prayer:  
Seeds for Discussion at a Meeting of the Cincinnati  
LCG Community**

Ray Geers  
Cincinnati Lay Cistercians of Gethsemani

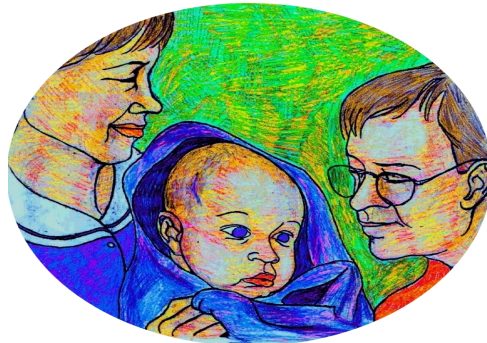
*An Introduction to Through the Lens of the Beloved*

We are all novices learning to relate to a fuller vision of ourselves as lay contemplatives. Some years ago, we in Cincinnati discussed prayer in the light of our Lay Cistercian Plan of Life. We did so with the help of ideas pulled from the book *Life of the Beloved* by Henri Nouwen. The echoes of the morning continued to resonate while sharing a ride with my friend Jim Bellew. As always, there was a considerable amount of conversation between us - about how wonderful it to share with folks on such a deep level and how this matters to us, and gives us confidence. It is a confidence born of a common journey which holds us together despite our individual differences. Day by day, our awareness of the wider applications of this journey grows, especially when we come together and share the ebb and flow of our sometimes barely articulate vision.

As we begin our Lay Cistercian community discussion for the year, it seems fitting that we reflect together on the nature of prayer as focused in the *Lay Cistercian Plan of Life*. In the past we have had many fruitful exchanges on the various forms of prayer as they are outlined in the *Plan*. It is hoped that in the discussion beginning today we can go a little deeper into a way that sees prayer and the active life as mutually related realities. I think most of us who are committed to contemplation as a way of life would agree that prayer and action are just different aspects of one unified field. In this "field" we are constantly learning to *live and move and have our being* Acts 17:28. Using scripture as our starting point, as well as our own ideas and experience, we will turn to the seminal ideas of a modern day spiritual master, Henri Nouwen, for added insight and inspiration. In this process, we hope to more fully en flesh the following hallmark words about prayer enunciated in the deceptively simple *Lay Cistercian Plan of Life*:

*"Prayer must be valued as an expression of our relationship with God, a relationship that is nurtured by a transformed consciousness of the presence of God in our inner depths".*

The gospel account of Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River acts as a pivotal point in his life and ours. Jesus' fullest humanity radiates here when he hears a voice which says "This is my beloved" Matt3:17 or "You are my beloved" Mk1:11, Lk3:22. This is the very story that Henri Nouwen begins his reflections in the book *Life of the Beloved: Spiritual Living in a Secular World*. I read this book some years ago and wrote copious notes from which I will be quoting throughout this little introduction.



According to Henri Nouwen, our experience here can be the same discovery as Jesus': the realization of our ultimate human identity as the Beloved of God. Here the primordial relationship and purpose of our lives is clearly given to us. From this viewpoint, our "belovedness" is a fundamental given, a mutual bond between each of us and the supreme God-Reality. We become more conscious of this relationship as we whole-heartedly accept and grow within it. It is a notion that resonates well, I believe, with the inspired intuitions of our Cistercian tradition.

*"The truth, even though I cannot feel it right now, is that I am the chosen child of God, precious in God's eyes, called the Beloved from all eternity, and held safe in an everlasting embrace."*Life of the Beloved (LOB) 59

This is our original blessing no matter who we are or whether we realize it or not. Our primordial nature calls us to recognize and respond to this reciprocal relationship. In his treatise *Steps of Humility* St. Bernard, in good Socratic fashion, directs the monk to first "know thyself". This advice became a hallmark of the Cistercian tradition. Knowing ourselves as originally and continually blessed helps us to navigate the rugged terrain of the spiritual/secular life. Being the beloved of God, who is coextensive with the boundless reaches of all creation/creativity, is love and loving without limit.

*"From the moment we claim the truth of being the Beloved, we are faced with the call to become who we are. Becoming the Beloved is the greatest spiritual journey we have to make... (it) means letting*

*the truth of our Belovedness become enfleshed in everything we think, say or do.”* LOB 43, 45

*Spiritual Living in a Secular World* is the subtitle of Nouwen's book for good reason. Like any vowed or specifically religious or dedicated life, being the Beloved involves us in a novitiate through better and worse, sickness and health, partings and death itself. We are journeymen and women setting out on "a long and painful process of appropriation or, better, incarnation." LOB 45 The journey is all the more perilous if we set out on it without good guidelines and good guides. As we try to carry our original blessing with us whole and pure, we discover what tradition has called sin magnetically working against us. Commenting upon this phenomenon, Michael Casey OCSO wrote in *Strangers to the City* that we live in an age of extreme individualism which is reflected in a "privatized," "designer religion" mindset. Formation according to the wisdom and structures of an ancient tradition attempts to circumvent this obstacle.

*"What I want to describe is how the movements of the Spirit of Love manifest themselves in our daily struggles and how we can develop disciplines to identify these movements and respond to them in our actions."* LOB 47

For Nouwen, Eucharistic action becomes the very best model and practice for identifying and responding to God as his Beloved both for our sake and the sake of all sentient beings. The practice has four phases which correspond to the four actions of Jesus in initiating the Eucharist: Taking, Blessing, Breaking and Sharing. My plan is to focus on each of these actions, or prayerful movements into the *transformed consciousness* (as pointed to by our Lay Cistercian *Plan of Life*), and to see how they affect our lives as the Beloved.

#### TAKEN/CHOSEN

*Now as they were eating, Jesus **took** some bread, and when he had said the blessing he broke it and gave it to the disciples.* Matt 26:26

The first "step" in this Eucharistic movement of being the Beloved is to acknowledge that we have been purposefully **chosen** by God, both as individuals and as members of the universal cosmic body. To see ourselves as "taken or chosen" is to realize the divine purposes for us as our possibilities. You could say that the Lay Cistercian *Plan of Life* is one particular way to live this Eucharistic, gospel life. The seed of belovedness is inherent in all, but whether we allow it to do amazing things with us depends on our willingness to allow ourselves, to give our consent, to being "taken" or "chosen" by divine possibilities. In process thought, the attraction of God's possibilities over us is called the "lure" whereas

the *Rule of Benedict* speaks of a "holy desire". In either case, we are freely invited to accept our "chosenness" and to become more and more deeply the Beloved of God - who in turn becomes more and more our Beloved.

It probably needs to be emphasized that to truly love God always and inevitably means to love the beings created and sustained by God's ongoing genesis. "To be chosen does not mean that others are rejected." LOB 54 The veil of confusion created by sin obscures our true nature and vocation as the Beloved. Nouwen alerts us to the battles surrounding our chosenness. When we lose touch with who we are as unique, special, precious beings "seen by God from all eternity" we also lose touch with the foundation on which we can build a life as the Beloved. The primary problem and temptation, therefore, is to accept the lie that we are not worthy of the divine relationship. This in turn exposes us to the primary sin of self-rejection.

*"...the world persists in its efforts to pull us into the darkness of self-doubt, low self-esteem, self-rejection, and depression. And this is because it is as insecure, fearful, self-depreciating people that we can most easily be used and manipulated by the powers surrounding us." LOB 58*

As in our own *Plan of Life*, Nouwen proposes a few spiritual practices to help us to safely navigate through this desert/garden world of angels and demons, fruits and weeds. First, we must keep unmasking the powers of the world which are manipulative, controlling, power-hungry and ready to destroy to get what they want. LOB 59 Nouwen writes of the world's greatest weapons against our owning our chosenness: the power of ignorance and of "the lie."

*"I beg you, do not surrender the word 'chosen' to the world. Dare to claim it as your own, even if it is constantly misunderstood."  
LOB 43*

*"Every time you feel hurt, offended, or rejected, you have to dare to say to yourself: 'These feelings, strong as they may be, are not telling me the truth about myself.'" LOB 59*

Second, we must keep looking for people and places where truth is spoken and where we are reminded of our deepest identity as the chosen Beloved ones of God. LOB 60 For many of us, such "people and places" would include family and church community, our learning communities and communities of social interaction, our contemplative communities and our fellowship with folks of other wisdom traditions.

Finally, we must celebrate our chosenness constantly. This means saying "thank you" to God and to all who remind us of our chosenness, including the people in the relationships just mentioned above. We can all celebrate our gratitude because it is the most fruitful way of deepening our awareness that we are not an "accident", but rather, a trajectory of divine love. We are intended to be the light and delight of God - individually and corporately. Here is where many of our formal and informal spiritual practices in the *Plan of Life* plug in, such as the practice of spiritual friendship. "Deep friendship is a calling forth of each other's chosenness and a mutual affirmation of being precious in God's eyes." LOB 65

### BLESSED

*...and when he had said the **blessing** he broke it and gave it to the disciples. Matt 26:26*

The second step in the transformative Eucharistic movement proposed by Nouwen is to humbly receive the **blessings** of the Beloved. For Nouwen, the key to what it means to be blessed entails first a careful attention by the one who blesses (a spiritual companion, say) to the innate gifts and talents within the fellow Beloved. Such divine-like noticing then leads naturally to encouragement. The Beloved are encouraged to continue to walk more deeply in their Eucharistic path to God-consciousness. Nouwen doesn't discuss in detail what it means to be blessed Eucharistically, but it seems that merely to point the way to such ideas encourages us to draw them out a little bit more. So, that is what I intend to do in the following paragraphs.

Jesus' words and actions are made again present for us - who are many and one, in the rite of consecration. As the chosen bread and wine are blessed in Eucharist, so in an analogous way are the Beloved ones.

*"earth has given... fruit of the vine"*

First, we are blessed in our evolutionary origins through our parents all the way back to the cosmic dust from which we came. We are blessed in that God intended us, our very selves, through all that came before, through all which is now, and through that which will continue to evolve - "world without end".

*"Human hands have made... the work of human hands"*

We are similarly blessed through the dynamic and complex social and instrumental development that preceded our entrance on the world scene. With pride and all the humility which comes with this truth, we realize that we stand on the shoulders of giants and all the artisan saints who made good the work of their hands (and minds and hearts).

*"It will become for us the bread of life... our spiritual drink."*



Finally, we are blessed by the God-inspired purposes offered to us as possibilities every moment of our lives. This movement into blessing requires that we listen to the "deep gentle voice" that blesses us with the truth about ourselves: our origins, development and possibilities. Listening and acting on this voice in obedience is, of course, a central theme of the Rule of Benedict, the inspirational guide of the Cistercian way of life. Once we begin to sense this blessed voice (not audible, Nouwen writes, but echoed in the actions of our daily lives) we need to claim it as our own. We in turn will naturally desire to help others to discover the blessed voice within themselves.

*"Well, if the blessing speaks the truth and the curse speaks lies about who we are, we are faced with the very concrete question: How to hear and claim the blessing?" LOB 75*

Nouwen shares two spiritual practices for those earnestly seeking to hear and claim the blessing of the Beloved ones. The first suggestion is for a "faithful discipline of prayer" that "reveals to you that you are the blessed one and gives you the power to bless others." LOB 78 The prayer Henri suggests here is one of openness and listening for thirty minutes a day in solitude. This certainly resonates with the description for contemplative prayer in the LCG *Plan of Life*. Nouwen also recommends a form of what we would call *lectio divina*. As advocated especially in early monastic literature, Nouwen recommends memorization of inspirational words to recall them spontaneously throughout the day.

The second recommendation Nouwen makes for claiming one's blessedness is the "cultivation of presence".

*"By presence I mean attentiveness to the blessedness that comes to you day after day, year after year." LOB 79*

We cannot receive the blessings that we haven't taken the time to observe in and around us. LOB 81 Scripture tells us that "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." 1Corinthians 12:7 It is as if the good, not only of the individual but of the entire group, is accentuated when any gift is noticed and proclaimed. If this is so, why do we often stumble in our recognition of gifts, or miss out on the opportunity altogether? Sometimes the trouble with recognizing our gifts, or blessedness, is that we are so continuously blessed. Thus, we fail to notice them as special. Do we take the time to thank God's grace-inspired people for blessing us?

Why do we call on God most forcefully when we are experiencing life's more limiting situations? This question leads us into the next movement in Nouwen's

Eucharistic dance of the Beloved. The blessings potentially and mysteriously seem to abound when we experience our creaturely **brokenness**.

## BROKEN

*When he had taken his place at the table with them, he took the bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. At this point their eyes were opened and they recognized him... Then they told what had happened on the road, and how they recognized him when he broke the bread. Luke 24:30-31, 35*

This passage from the gospel of Luke is one of my favorites, and my guess is that the same can be said for many of us who have seen or "tasted" its meaning. Why is it such a meaningful story? The disciple Cleopas and his unnamed companion (perhaps his wife?) discover something powerful in the breaking of bread that Jesus shares with them. What did they find? Perhaps they found a compelling answer to the inevitable problem of human brokenness. Brokenness had crashed in and made a heap of ashes out of their lives - against their plans and - as it often does with us - against their fond hopes. For this discussion, human brokenness includes our various struggles, sufferings, guilt feelings and our awareness of impending death. The more we age, the more we become aware of the inevitability of what the philosopher Karl Jaspers calls the "boundary situations" of life. What we do with this awareness determines the quality of our lives as the Beloved ones of God.

The human reality is this: no good habit and no spiritual practice can exempt us from real crisis breaking into our lives. The Eucharistic journey, so far described, has included two phases: accepting our being chosen as Beloved of God and allowing the blessings of this relational existence to flow through us to the groups and environments that we live in. Now with the advent of brokenness, we are called to a conversion of our fears and disappointments; they can bring us to a new trust beyond our timid expectations or they can make us run away into a life lived in denial of our ultimate belovedness. Our challenge in crisis is to go beyond mere avoidance of painful stressors and beyond seeking for mere survival. The advent of brokenness is a grace, a gift of the Wisdom, Power and Presence of God offered to us as a path of prayer and inner transformation. This third part of Henri Nouwen's four-fold response to brokenness is the opportunity to transcend the limits of our boundary situations. Everything depends on how we respond to actual experiences of brokenness.

Henri asks: "How do we respond to this brokenness?" LOB 92 This question echoes in our discussion of the brokenness-phase of prayer. To say that

brokenness is a valid and integral phase of prayer already speaks volumes about what is normal human living. There is a wisdom here which touches us, if we allow it, with a warmth of compassion ready to walk with us on our own road to Emmaus. In facing the drastic or unexpected losses that come our way - of loved ones, of livelihood, of personal meaning, of personal or even bodily freedom and integrity - we empathize with and, in some ways, re-live the experience of Emmaus. Despite the tangible help of living under the guidance of a "Plan" of Life, we lay contemplatives know we are not invulnerable, either individually or as a group, from brokenness. When misfortune comes along and pulls our security out from under us, we need only recall the events of Emmaus to be open to the same warmth and wisdom that was theirs.

Unfortunately, this author feels unqualified at this point to write further on this topic with any certainty or sense of being profitable. I believe that others with more experience would do better justice to the subject. I hope our group's conversations about the author's ideas to this date and our own experiences will continue through the last topic of this project: **Sharing**. My hope is that these seminal ideas will be enough food for thought to spark some of the same fruitful conversations that we have had together these past several months during our Greater CLCG community meetings. Who knows? Perhaps there is one, or several, amongst us who would like to share further on these topics? I thank each of you for allowing me the opportunity to scratch a little upon the surface of this richly rewarding subject.

#### Sources

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## Anniversary –

passed 48 years ago, they say.  
Well, that number counts for nothing.  
Better to say, he exists in the untimed.

Time measure counts not  
In the boundless embrace of All-time.  
Was – is – will be coexist there  
Simultaneously.

Nothing is outside this,  
Inside revolves  
Time as well as history.

We wearily count out years  
Until counting amounts to no account,  
And that, due not to abstraction from

But fullness in  
all-time.

We age in particles; that we leave  
behind,  
This we gain awhile, in advance already  
Smell afar  
That beyond.

Being untimed is being  
Altogether.

A disk with no edge  
Whose center is everywhere.

Paul Quenon, OCSO



# Monkish Son

## Chapter 1: Big Imaginations

Ray Geers  
Cincinnati Lay Cistercians of Gethsemani

### An Introduction to *Monkish Son*

Who among us, upon looking back on his or her life, could fail to see failures left and right? Who could refrain from laughing at the multiple episodes of over-seriousness and basic clueless-ness? And, I wonder, who would not be eternally grateful for the love and grace which never bailed when we were humanly lost and yet eternally seeking the blessed way? It is with such thoughts that I go forward in sharing this first chapter of *Monkish Son*, a book that has been writing itself in me for many years now. The psalm verse says it all: “In your love remember me.” (Psalm 25:7). It is the voice of my youth speaking to an older age, of a wayward soul to the heart of forgiveness and mercy.

*In your love remember me.*

Psalm 25:7



### *Things happening in the world in 1981:*

- Ronald Reagan succeeds Jimmy Carter as the 40th president of the United States. The 52 Americans held hostage in Iran are released after 441 days.
- The Center for Disease Control and Prevention reports the first recognized case of Acquired Immune Syndrome (AIDS).
- The original IBM Personal Computer (PC) is released for sale in the United States.<sup>1</sup>

## *Fall of 1981 in the world of the monkish son:*

It is only a two and a half hour or so drive from my ancestral home in Cincinnati to the Abbey known as *Our Lady of Gethsemani*. The first time I approached *Our Lady* was from the back seat of a 1973 Toyota Corolla. The Corolla was quite a compact thing back then. I can remember the cramped feeling in my legs from sitting behind the driver Paul Enderle for those two and half or so hours. To my right was Doug Moore and directly in front of him sat John Koize, a dark wavy-haired kid who wrote poetry. We were four Catholic prep school boys on senior retreat - running late because Paul took I-71 instead of the scenic Blue Grass Highway, like the rest of our class.

We passed the time listening to John's collection of cassette tapes which were full of comic satire and social lampooning. One track featured the beautiful voice of Melissa Manchester surrounded by an uplifting musical orchestration. The song she sang had a rich, swelling chorus that could have served as our sophisticated, teenage anthem.

*You are a fluke of the universe.  
You have no right to be here.  
And whether you can hear it or not,  
The universe is laughing behind your back.<sup>2</sup>*

We saw the joke and fearlessly breathed in the attitude it projected. After all, we had read Kafka and Kurt Vonnegut and we grew up in the 1970's. There seemed to be no end to the critical, and self-critical, reflections and distortions in the world around us.

On the same tape was a ridiculous little spoof about orange juice that caught our attention as we sat stuck in Louisville traffic. In the mock advertisement, a mother was attempting to serve some new kind of juice to her son in a sweet, Mrs. Cleaver-to-Beaver, tone of voice. You could hear her fake smile as she touted the wholesome goodness of the juice:

"Drink it up honey. It's made with genuine reconstituted constitutes *and pulp-like substances!*"

The guys in the car all laughed at this, especially at Koize's slow rendition of the phrase *puuullllpp-laiieekkk ssuubbsstiinces*. Over and over for days he reminded us of the awful saccharin voice used to push what amounted to garbage on an unsuspecting kid. But for some reason I couldn't join in the hilarity. *Pulp-like substances* offended my sensitive conscience like red, irritated skin and it

bothered my ears like music which is only loud and twisted noise. It signaled danger to me, a sign of the times which ought to be resisted, not just laughed at. Something new was beginning to bud in me. I was over-reacting to the world I thought I understood, "fundamental-izing" things a bit - you might say. Something about *pulp-like substances* was just too real for my comfort and seemed a perversion really. Laughing along with it amounted to compliance with its pessimism, even rewarding its cleverness. No longer for this guy! At seventeen years of age, I already knew the disconnectedness and the alienation of *pulp-like substances*. When I got to Gethsemani, I found a life being led which couldn't have been more radically different. It appealed to me like an oasis in a cultural desert.

Paul finally got his Corolla out of the traffic jam and started moving with determined speed towards Gethsemani. Koize's tape had played itself out, so Paul reached over and turned on the radio. Neal Young was singing the best song he ever wrote. "That Crazy Canadian" was how my philosophy teacher, Mr. Yeazel, referred to him the next day when we asked him and Father Manning to let Paul strum his guitar to *Heart of Gold* during the mass on Sunday. It was gospel music to us. Our adult leaders eventually said yes, and the liberality of their permission seemed to make our Catholic faith, and religion itself, more relevant to us.

The song from the radio still echoed in the air as the car wheels of the Toyota crushed their way through the gravel drive up to the monastery gate.

*I've been to Hollywood,  
I've been to Redwood  
I crossed the ocean for a heart of gold.  
It's been in my mind,  
It's such a fine line  
That keeps me searching for a heart of gold,  
And I'm getting old.<sup>3</sup>*

It was the fall harvest time. We stepped out of the Toyota and walked over to a nearby field before heading into the retreat house. The tall grasses of the abbey property had recently been cut and tied into huge stacks. We called the big rolled up stacks of grass "elephants" and attacked the poor things with makeshift sticks as if they were huge monsters to be extinguished. John Koize thrust his wooden stick into the belly of the stacked-up grasses with bemused adolescent gusto and the rest of us joined in the slaughter. There was mayhem in the field, and my friends were creating their own primitive initiation rites amid the carnage! I was sort of enjoying it, but less so than they were, as if part of me was

not quite there. At least, that's my take on it now. This isolated event, this flashback which happened over thirty years ago, I can only recall in a dreamy sort of way. Sometimes I wonder if it wasn't all a dream. It was the year we began saying goodbye to our childhood, but we seemed unqualified for the task at times. Maybe we were trying too hard to just keep being young.

After I got settled into one of the old Gethsemani retreat house rooms, which at that time was only a little bigger than a walk-in closet, I took the first opportunity I could find to escape out into the woods. My teachers and fellow classmates were still busy unpacking and going over rules as I nonchalantly sauntered out the door. Not waiting for someone to join me, I snuck away around the back of the guesthouse and beyond the graveyard where the monks buried their dead. There at the edge of the yard was a little sign which read: "MONASTIC AREA. DO NOT ENTER". The place was as quiet as a picture, no one was around to see me as far as I could tell. As if destiny herself was pulling me, I crossed over the forbidden barrier.

I had grown up with a small farm on the edge of my suburban neighborhood. My friends and I often went to explore this private property of woods and fields where cows grazed the eastern side and horses loafed around on the western edge of the property bordering our subdivision. There were signs back then on the posts of the perimeter barb wired fence which stated in sober, adult-like letters: "NO TRESSPASSING". Our older siblings had told us stories of the farmer who owned the land, how he liked to shoot salt at trespassing kids to scare them away. I imagined him as an angry-looking man with a grizzled chin, a shotgun barrel sticking out of his kitchen window. But I never did see him or hear the sound of his gun. We were irrationally afraid of his donkey, or was it a mule? - suburban kids didn't know the difference - which we often heard braying in the distance. It might spring out at any moment from the shadows of the underbrush and attack unsuspecting trespassers. Of course, we were young kids with big imaginations. Our mothers were busy at home cleaning houses and attending to babies, since most of us were Catholic boys from big families. Our dads were all at work somewhere else that we never saw. Truly, we were on our own and given free reign of the neighborhood at about the same age one learns to ride a bicycle.

As I look back at that time from a distance of a few decades, I marvel at what it was to be children in that neighborhood and in those woods a decade or so before land development came and destroyed it all. Up till then we could pretty much go wherever we wanted and do whatever we wanted - provided we were home in time for supper.



By the time I was fifteen, trespassing had become a habit with me, either with friends or, more frequently, on my own. I would bring a book or a journal and maybe a musical instrument to “Jackie’s Woods” or the “farmer’s land”. Every out-of-the way place was a potential “Walden Pond” to me and I, the young Henry David Thoreau, would survey the unpromising countryside and strain my imagination for inspiration. I was the wandering Sanyasis mendicant who considered the whole world as his own and walked through forbidden barriers as if he were walking from room to room in his own house. I was born with God’s blessing, or at least without his curse. My God carried no salt gun. There in the wildlife I found my wild life. There I learned to breathe easy amid the sounds and smells that would seep in and out of me while lost in them.

So, during my very first trip to Gethsemani, as I already began to say, I instinctually went out alone into the woods. I brought with me some letters that had been written especially for me on the occasion: one from my mother, one from my father and one from my best high school friend - Joey “Bean” Vandenberg. Mom and Dad each assured me that, even though I was just one of nine children, I was especially loved by them, in fact, by everybody really. Dad told me in his almost illegible scrawl that I could be whatever I put my mind to. Now was an important time for me to decide, he said. “We love you”, Mom told me in perfectly average grammar-school handwriting. “Sometimes you make us so worried for you.” She went on: “God loves you too.” At the end of their letters, their voices seemed to combine in crescendo: *We hope you have a very good, a wonderful retreat!*

My friend Joe Bean, like me, was a straight “A” student and member of the National Honors Society. When I opened his letter, there was a little package inside about the size of a couple paper matchbooks. It was wrapped tightly and stapled firmly closed. Inside the package was an expertly rolled cigarette. “Oh, my God!” I said to myself. “It’s a rolled up joint - of marijuana!” “Enjoy it!” he wrote.

I had an incredulous belly laugh at the craziness of my friend Joe Bean. He was a year older than me and had been to Gethsemani for his senior retreat the year before. Gethsemani was “intense” he said, “So intense... You have to go and experience it for yourself Ray!” We were in the finished upstairs of his family’s brick red Cape Cod house when he told me this. Every house in the neighborhood was a Cape Cod brick, built during the baby-booming 1950s.

“It’s so quiet there”, he continued, “that you can actually hear yourself think.”

“Think? I can hear myself think all the time.” I said. “All I ever do is think!”

“Yeh,” he said, “but how can you think anything fresh or new in this mixed-up world we live in? School keeps cramming things into our heads so we can turn around and spit it back at them. The media only wants to sell us someone else's dreams - just like the politicians. And our parents - they work their butts off so they can afford a little time to play at meaningless games. They play to refresh themselves just so they can go back to work again... and so on, and so on.”

He stopped to take a long drag from the pipe which was on fire with the weed we were smoking and sharing. The room reeked with the delicate, herbal smell of pot, as familiar to us as the aroma of old clothes on laundry day. The domestic air of the room seemed changed for us, like the way rainfall changes a dry day. Contours that normally separated objects from one another seemed to connect and blend together. One's logical, National Honor's Society, mind could not be counted on for reliability when it was high. Insignificant thoughts could be mistaken for deeply significant ones, or vice-versa.

When Bean and I smoked pot, we were unabashed escapists. It was our way of “just saying no” to the world we lived in. We were among a sub-culture of what was then known as the “burn-outs”. Burn-outs were like vandals who were de-facing their own lives by taking the drug option as a recreational and philosophical choice. Maybe it didn't affect others in the same way, but even as I was surrendering myself to the hallucinogenic smoke, I sensed an encroaching diminishment of my life's original potential. The drug was puncturing our little water bucket minds; is how I put it now. Yes! That's what it was, whether we knew it or not: puncturing of our little water bucket minds, the silly, IRREPLACABLE things. How often since that time, and in so many other situations of similar self-destructiveness, have I heard the vernacular echoes of words that were recorded by that ancient physician Luke: “*Dude! Forgive them- they do not know what they are doing.*” In other words, how often *are we*, simply and inculpably, clueless? Scratching my head like that fabled simpleton, ole Willy, I'd say: “There's a hole in the bucket! (dear Liza, dear Liza) ...” But how to fix it? In my case, it seemed a serious question: But how? If the mind works by addition rather than by subtraction, and if all the foolish things we ever did will never go completely away, what can we do to fix our sorry selves? Consciously or unconsciously, I was hoping to find a solution to this problem.

Thank God, by the end of senior year I gave up recreational drugs, buckled myself down, and began to make something else of my life, holes and all. In the

process, I gave up my best friend Joe Bean whose philosophy of life seemed to run parallel with the music he listened to - from *The Beatles* to *Pink Floyd* to Punk Rock and who knows what after that, because we lost touch with each other. Little did I know then that my tall, skinny friend would eventually rehabilitate his own broken bucket - but that's another story. The point is this: That it was Bean's contagious disquiet and restlessness that convinced me to come to Gethsemani in the first place. Whatever ultimately became of this enterprise, I know who to thank for starting the whole thing. I can't blame this whole story solely on God.

So, there I was walking in forbidden and, for me, uncharted woods while my high school classmates, led by our teachers, were trying to experience what it must be like to be monks by not talking to each other the rest of the night. There was a joint in my pocket, but I didn't plan to fire it up just then. I heard there might be hermits in the woods, and both feared and hoped that I might stumble across one. Perhaps he would have compassion on this teenager lost in more ways than one. I did not worry about the salt gun or the mythic donkey in these woods. I just kept walking. I didn't see anyone anywhere. But I should have paid more attention to the changes taking place with the daylight. There was less of it as my journey progressed. I was busy praying for God to deliver me from my undefined adolescent problems. How was I to know that the abbey had over twenty-two hundred acres of land to get lost in?

As was my habit when alone in the woods, I found a tree with soft ground around it to sit cross legged against in a lotus--like way. Since it had been a long day, I stared up through the cathedral of trees with their leaves dancing in shimmering, kaleidoscopic shapes, and closed my eyes and fell asleep.

My oneness with nature was disturbed by a cold chill. I don't know how much time passed by before I woke up from this unplanned nap. By now it was evening and getting darker in this Rip Van Winkle wilderness, darker than I was used to in the suburbs of Cincinnati. A cold breeze disturbed the trees as I rose to my feet to get back to the retreat house. Only trouble was - I didn't know the way back in the dark. I followed my instincts, but they only had me traveling in circles. It dawned on me that I was still technically in school while on this retreat and that my absence, once detected, would fetch me a lot of trouble. I began galloping through the evening woods with renewed purpose, as if for my very survival. Occasionally the branches of sticker bushes got in the way; so, I gathered a few cuts in my flight back to civilization. My pants and socks had hitchhikers all over them, but I couldn't worry about that now. I was singularly focused in a way that only a sense of danger seems to bring about. With my heart galloping and my breath coming in gasps, I eventually made it to a road which

was quiet at that time of the evening. I followed it left and dumb luck led me back to the monastery. There I could have kissed the ground if there were time for it but had to slip back into the high school world as if I had never been away. Lucky for me, nobody was talking to anyone about anything since they were all doing the silence thing. So, my departure and return, if noticed at all, went unreported to the ones who could have made me pay for my latest mistake.

It was an awful, awesome feeling running blind in the Gethsemani woods that fall. I was seized by a profound sense of being lost and of searching for the way back. I see now that being lost in the woods that day was a turning point that convinced me that I needed guidance on my journey. I was by nature a trespasser into spiritual things. I had no solid background for it, no training to speak of certainly, except for the many books I had read and the raw feelings I had developed along the confusing byways of young adulthood. Only a few, very rare, people had ever encouraged me to pursue the spiritual life, and their directions weren't clear to me. My most influential role models up to that time had been writers who used their words to explore like Christopher Columbus used ships. The most contemporary of them were dead a generation or so ahead of my time, but somehow they were all still very much alive in the crazy old Don Quixote who was always coming up and kicking around in me.

<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1981\\_in\\_the\\_United\\_States](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1981_in_the_United_States)

<sup>2</sup> <http://dmdb.org/lyrics/deteriorata.html>. The song is from the comedy group *National Lampoon* on their album *Radio Dinner*, Banana/Blue Thumb Records BTS-38, 1972. Written by Christopher Guest, it is a parody of an older piece called *Desiderata* and the original words were the following:

*You are a child of the universe.*

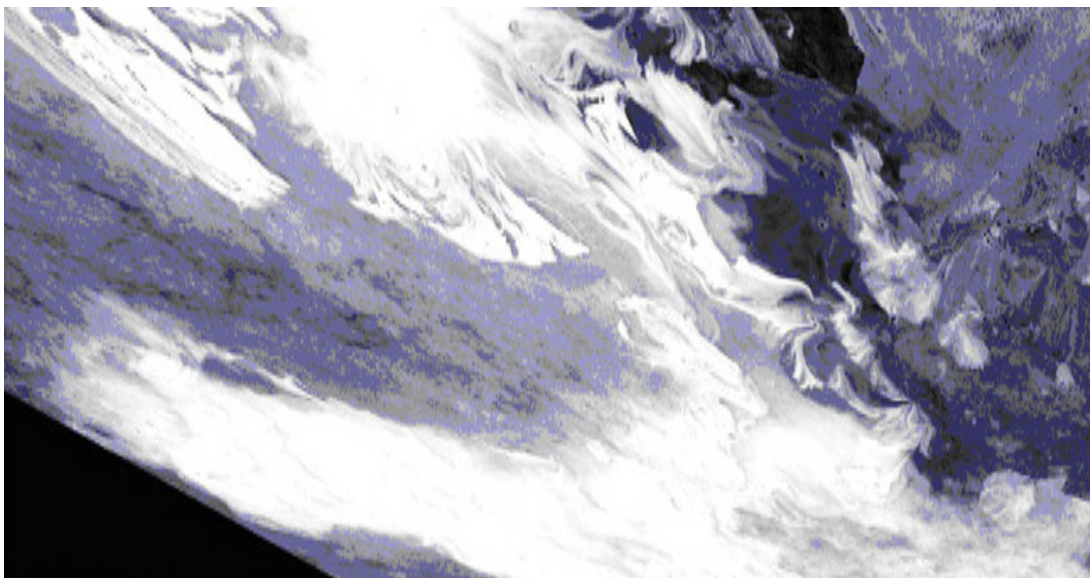
*No less than the trees and the stars, you have a right to be here.*

*And whether or not it is clear to you,*

*No doubt the universe is unfolding as it should.*

<sup>3</sup> Neil Young, *Heart of Gold*, from the album *Harvest*, 1972.





## Nine Tailed Tiger

Thunder spoke in long  
grand sentences that stretched to  
distant horizons—

sky truck lumbering  
along rocky road hauling  
loosely packed lumber.

Plywood picked up when  
tornados demolished homes  
in Louisiana.

No one argues with  
Force of Nature. It strides by  
without excuses.

Only afterward  
we find out what had happened  
for good or for ill.

Next day everything  
settles down to a benign  
mute placidity.

The nine tailed Tiger  
tornado has gone to sleep,  
soft, warm pussy cat

Paul Quenon, OCSO

## A Prayer for God's Help

O God, come to my assistance! O Lord, make haste to help me!  
Praise to the Father and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, both now and forever; the  
God who is and was and is to come at the end of the ages.

Lord, be the Master of my heart!

May Your divine life, light and love so permeate my being as to overwhelm the  
darkness that lurks within.

Help me to live with You in the present moment so that everything I come in  
contact with will be affected by Your presence in my life.

Lord, bless me, protect me from all evil and bring me to eternal life, through  
Jesus who lives and reigns with You in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God for  
ever and ever.

Amen



Sources: This is a composite of several traditional liturgical prayers and “phrases of wisdom” that have been handed to me by individuals who were particularly formative in my life. For example, Sr. Alice Potts signed her photograph to me with, “Live in the present moment!” My first wife Patsy’s dying prayer was, “Lord be the Master of my heart.” Sr. Alice also said that she wanted everything she came in contact with to be affected by the presence of God in her life. The terms “divine light, life and love” were presented by Fr. Thomas Keating in his workshop on *The Divine Therapy*. The “work of God” refers to monastic prayer as taught in *The Rule of Benedict*.

I have found this prayer, which is longer than a “sacred word”, to be helpful (at any time during the day) in bringing my mind back to “base” when it chooses to wander into unwholesome or otherwise inappropriate territory.

Allen Thyssen, May 11, 20170



## Mild January Eve

Slow wind shifts shapes of  
Spruce trees—some unheard music  
Only spruce trees know.

Afternoon shadows slant  
Across damp asphalt, blue  
Sky glancing off puddles.

In this world of chance  
Where much goes wrong, how whole, how  
One—this pause in time!

This shifting hour  
When contentment fills dark green spruce,  
Waiting for sunset.

Paul Quenon, OCSO

## **Report to the Lay Cistercians of Gethsemani Regarding the VII Encounter of the International Association of Lay Cistercian Communities in Avila, Spain, June 17<sup>th</sup> – June 24<sup>th</sup>, 2017**

**Provided by Lay Cistercian of Gethsemani Representatives, Rebecca Ballard DiLoreto and Scott Gilliam**

### Brief History:

The International Association of Lay Cistercians (IALCC) has had six previous meetings. All were formative, some occurring prior to official recognition of the IALCC. <http://www.cistercianfamily.org/> These meetings occurred in Quilvo - 2000, Conyers, Ga.- 2002, Clairvaux – 2005, Huerta – 2008, Dubuque – 2011, Lourdes – 2014.

This year's meeting occurred at Avila, Spain from June 17<sup>th</sup> – June 24<sup>th</sup>.

### Overview:

The meeting was held at a special center dedicated to St. Teresa of Avila (aka St Teresa of Jesus). The Center is called the International Teresian and St. John of the Cross Center, University of Misticia (CITeS). It is outside of the walled portion of Avila.

We were blessed to have Brother Gaetan Blanchette join us. Fr. Michael had initially planned to attend but Abbott Elias needed Fr. Michael to run Gethsemani in his absence, during the International Encounter. Thus, Abbott Elias asked Brother Gaetan to represent the Abbey at the Avila meeting. Brother Gaetan did an excellent job contributing to the conversations and debates throughout the meeting. Scott Gilliam and Rebecca Ballard DiLoreto were the lay representatives.

The meeting consisted of Plenary Sessions where all participants used head phones with translators making contemporaneous translations of all that was said. Thus, we had translators for English to Spanish, Spanish to English, French to Spanish, Spanish to French, English to French, French to English. Then we had Language based Committee meetings one each for French, Spanish, English. Those who spoke German and those from the Netherlands and Nigeria joined our English Language group and those from Belgium joined the French group. No Italian speakers were present. We devoted the language group sessions to working on two texts, one a



statement about how we understand and value community within the International Lay Cistercian community and the second, a draft of our statutes (essentially a set of bylaws to govern the IALCC). The meetings were punctuated with Celebration of the Eucharist and recitation of the Liturgy of the Hours. We rotated languages in these sessions (English, French, and Spanish).

You will be pleased to know that our representative, Scott Gilliam was elected to work on the text about community. Editing the texts of a document in this context is called *martyring* the texts. First, each language group martyred the texts. Then, Scott and Text members from the Spanish and French groups joined together to martyr further, resulting in a document that we all voted on at the end of the conference with translations available in French, Spanish and English. We do not have an electronic version yet of the final document, but will share it when it arrives.

In the Plenary Sessions we came to final votes on both the Text about Community and the Statutes that give guidance to our organizational structure and purpose as the International Association of Lay Cistercian Communities. We also elected the Coordinating Committee that will plan for the next Encounter slated for 2020 and for the alternates who would serve on the Coordinating Committee if a substitute is needed. We are excited that Scott Gilliam, our representative, was elected to serve as the English Speaking Alternate.

We heard a number of lectures from Abbots during the week as well. These included talks by Dom Armand Veilleux, Dom Isidore of Huerta, Dom Mauro Giuseppe Lepori (Abbot General of the Cistercian Order) and the Bishop of Avila, Mons. Jesus Garcia Burillo. We also heard a talk by Dom Eamon Fitzgerald, Abbot General of the OCSO, who attended our meetings during the last two days of the conference. We have the English translations for most of these on paper and we will share with all members on our Gethsemani LCG website as soon as we can scan them in.

#### Information to Share:

1. During the IALCC meeting updates were provided to all delegates from each language group's regional meeting:
  - a. Of note, the French language commission invited all in their region to their planning meeting. (For our LCG consideration, it would be good to know if more members of the LCG community would like to attend an English language regional meeting wherein we can plan for the 2020 Encounter and enjoy one another's presence. We would appreciate a discussion of the level of interest in such a regional meeting by each LCG local group.) The French Language Commission had this meeting a year ago.
  - b. Tina Parayre, who is the Commission Chair for the Spanish Speaking Commission, presented on the Spanish meeting. This language group also invited everyone to their planning meeting. They had their planning meeting

a year ago. The following numbers participated from the following locations: Huerta 14; LaOliva 2; Vico 6; Villamyor 2; La Palma 4; Sobrado 5; Cardena 3; Templarios 5; Committee Coordinator 1. Tina, who supervises the Spanish Commission, also attended the US meeting at Conyers and facilitated the meeting at Conyers for Spanish speakers from Florida (6 people) and Mexico (2 People).

- c. Teresa McMahon, who is the Commission Chair for the English Speaking Commission presented on the English regional meetings. The English Commission had two preparatory meetings because their members were so spread out. The first was last fall at Holy Spirit, Conyers. Nineteen (19) people, representing eleven (11) communities, met at Conyers (Rebecca Ballard DiLoreto, Scott Gilliam, and Fr. Michael Casagram attended the meeting representing Gethsemani). The second English speaking preparatory meeting was in the Netherlands a few weeks later, with four communities represented by six participants. Teresa also reported that two English Commission regulars at IALCC international encounters were unable to attend the meeting in Avila: Brother Cassian from Holy Spirit and Peter Stewart from Southern Star Abbey New Zealand. Cassian and Peter wrote letters explaining their absences that were read to the delegates by Teresa.
2. In the English Commission meetings in Avila, the question of how communities are recognized and structured was discussed as well as the interplay between recognition, structure and capacity to vote at the International Meeting. For example, Holy Spirit in Conyers has a Lay Cistercian Leadership group which approves any new community. Each approved community has its own statutes, formation process, etc., and is recognized by the IALCC as a separate community with its own vote at International Meetings (there are seven recognized communities affiliated with Holy Spirit, each with its own vote at International Meetings). The online community for Iowa is concerned that in the future they will lose their vote because the men and women's monasteries have asked the groups associated with each in Iowa to join together under one umbrella. Gethsemani's organizational structure was likewise discussed (we have nine local communities which collectively share one vote at International Meetings). It is likely this issue of organizational structure, recognition and capacity to vote will receive further discussion by the involved English speaking monasteries. However, any restructuring that would increase the number of American Lay Cistercian Community votes (for example, if Gethsemani adopted the Conyers model) might be met with resistance from the other two language commissions (several members of the French Commission expressed displeasure with the number of votes the Conyers communities have and voiced a preference for a "one vote per monastery" system). Scott will keep the Lay Cistercians of Gethsemani informed on these issues as they develop and welcomes your input.
3. Members of the English Speaking Commission also discussed coming together on a regional basis for a retreat. As the primary location being considered for the next International meeting is Louisville, Kentucky, there are members interested in participating in a retreat either before or after the 2020 meeting. If any of our Lay Cistercians of Gethsemani have an interest in participating in or helping to organize and lead such a retreat, please feel free to let Rebecca know.

All the submissions for this issue of ***The Journal of the Lay Cistercians of Gethsemani Abbey*** are original material and are by the author/artists. All the pictures in this issue were by Ray Geers.

***A CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS***  
***The Journal of the Lay Cistercians of Gethsemani Abbey***

The *Journal of the Lay Cistercians of Gethsemani Abbey* invites different forms of reflection through essays, poetry and other written narratives, as well through art, photographs or video presentations. The *Journal* also encourages scholarly submissions, such as studies about Cistercian writers or themes by members. Monks of the Abbey are also invited to submit their comments and reflections to the *Journal*.

An editorial committee reviews submissions, may make suggestions for corrections or changes, if needed, and attempts to compose a balanced selection of material for each issue of the on-line periodical. The *Journal* will be posted when sufficient material has been accepted. Volunteers to help shape the *Journal* and assist with editorial committee reviews are welcome!

For further information or to submit work for consideration, contact Bill Felker, Journal Committee Coordinator, at [wlfelker@gmail.com](mailto:wlfelker@gmail.com) or (937) 767-7434.