

shapes her seeing. We aren't told many of the details of that life experience, but if we are attentive to what Luke tells us, a clear image of Anna begins to emerge.

I can see her in my mind's eye because I have known people like her. Her physical appearance is not as distinct for me as the quality of her presence. Every gesture she makes testifies to the depths of her wisdom and the rich quality of her life. Her movements are slow, deliberate, and calm, and though she is old, she exudes youth and hospitality. She is curious, open, and interested in others. She creates a welcoming space around her so that people are drawn to her and trust her with the secrets of their hearts. She radiates joy. This joy is not merely surface happiness but is deeply rooted in a life-tested hope that knows suffering and yet perceives that life is sheer gift and recognizes every breath as a connection to both the source of this gift and all other living beings. Every aspect, every step of her life has contributed to the quality of her presence.

While the deep prophetic wisdom of Anna is not the result of any isolated aspect of her life, her ascetic practice in the temple profoundly contributed to her recognition of God's face in the face of Jesus, and is both the most difficult and the most important aspect of her life to grasp. Ascetic practice is a vital component of spiritual life and yet is so easily distorted and misunderstood. When I think about asceticism, I am filled with images of great feats of overcoming: overcoming the distraction of hunger through fasting; overcoming anxiety, need, and loneliness through extended times of isolation in desert climates; overcoming human limitations through the denial of sleep; and overcoming sinfulness through hours spent kneeling in prayer. This emphasis on overcoming fills me with anxiety and stirs my competitive juices as I find myself remembering my long hours of overcoming in the gym. All I can think in the face of

these memories is "Run! Run as fast as you can! Asceticism is not for you!" When I link the asceticism of spiritual life to the discipline I learned in the gym, however, I think I am misunderstanding and distorting the role asceticism should play in spiritual life.

Asceticism should not be understood as a way to overcome the limitations of our humanity or to punish ourselves for those limitations. Nor should it be a practice entered into in order to achieve a goal or to accomplish a noteworthy human feat. Instead, asceticism is a way to make space in our lives for our awakening to grace. Rather than overcoming our human limitations, we enter more fully into them because it is in and through these very limitations that we become aware of the beauty of our vulnerability. Through our vulnerability, we recognize our dependence on God and receive our lives as gift. Ascetic discipline in the spiritual life helps us to let go of our illusion of control. It is less about overcoming and more about learning to receive. It is not about achieving, but about moving aside, allowing ourselves to be pushed off-center to make space for God and for others.

Perhaps the best way to understand asceticism is to think of an example we can relate to. There are great, noteworthy ascetics in the Christian tradition like St. Anthony, St. Benedict, and St. Francis. I wish I could relate to them, but the truth is I find their lives and the times in which they lived too far removed from mine to really help me navigate my way through my own life. I relate much better to ordinary ascetics, people I have known who have been shaped by living a long and purposeful life, people like my neighbor Anthony McCarty, who recently passed away at the age of ninety-five.

Mr. McCarty, as I called him, was in many ways a very ordinary man. He served in the Air Force, worked for Sun Oil, played the violin, was married for sixty-seven years, and was a father and grandfather. His asceticism was the asceticism



of ordinary life. He didn't seek out opportunities to deny himself but chose denial when his tasks and responsibilities required this of him. His love for music inspired him to cultivate the discipline necessary to be able to play the violin beautifully. His love of music introduced him to his wife—they met when they both played in a symphony in West Virginia—and this same love of music connected him to the wider community. He taught violin to neighborhood children and organized symphonies in his church and in the communities in which he lived right up until the day he died.

I first met Mr. McCarty because he agreed to teach my son Patrick to play the violin. Patrick was only six at the time, and so I would walk with him down our street to the music room in the McCarty house where I would watch Mr. McCarty give a violin lesson to Patrick, a lesson for which he would charge me a mere five dollars. There was a palpable peace and a sacramental sense of the time I spent in that room. I watched as Mr. McCarty taught Patrick to hold his bow, place his fingers on the strings, and read the notes on a staff, but these skills were only the surface manifestations of deeper lessons, lessons about reverence for life, lessons about the way a wise life requires discipline, respect, creativity, beauty, music, and meaning. Mr. McCarty did not convey these deeper lessons with words but with his gentle, patient manner, with his understated delight when Patrick would learn a new piece, and with his interested inquiry to me about how my week had gone. In his quiet, humble way, he communicated wisdom and the rich quality of life he had awakened to over many years of discipline and dedication to his joys and responsibilities.

When he died, my husband, John, and I attended his funeral. It was a bittersweet occasion as his wife, his children, his grandchildren, his friends, and the many people in the community he had touched gathered to celebrate the

wonderful long life he had lived. His funeral began with a trio of accomplished violinists playing classical pieces in his memory. As this beautiful music played, I read through the funeral program and noticed that a soloist would be featured during the service. I didn't recognize the name of this soloist and thought she must be quite talented to take this featured role at the funeral of such an accomplished musician. When the time came for this soloist to play, she stood up and her music stand was carried down to the front of the church by her mother. She was eight years old and was Mr. McCarty's most recent student. Her violin had tape marks near the strings to remind her where to place her fingers to form the notes of the two simple songs she played, the same tape marks I remembered Mr. McCarty placing on Patrick's violin years earlier. It was a fitting tribute to a man whose life of ascetic discipline sprang from love. His love for music ran so deep it was contagious. The asceticism of Mr. McCarty was not an asceticism of denial but asceticism in the service of expressing most fully his love for music. He understood that his musical talent was a gift from God and a path for serving God, and he wholeheartedly embraced this gift, giving himself over to it daily for over ninety years. Because the goal of his ascetic practice was not to overcome limitation or weakness but to most fully express his love, his dedicated, disciplined life overflowed to others. His lifelong practice of dedication to his love for music made space for others to experience this same love. The young soloist bravely playing at his funeral was the last of a long line of students who Mr. McCarty had invited into the space his asceticism had made for love.

Hearts shaped by faithful asceticism make room for others. Anna entered into her ascetic practice in the temple after a long life of experiencing God's love through her ancestors, her husband, and her community. Her experience of God's love stirred in her a yearning to see and know God more