

May 2012: Situating Oneself

 spiritualityshoppe.org/may-2012-situating-oneself

By mid-November of 2011 I had finished my writing projects and my table was relatively cleared. I sought God regarding my direction and sensed a leading to pursue my studies in the history of monasticism further. In particular, I decided to explore the spirituality of the fourth century after Christ. I began reading the literature of early Egyptian monasticism. I also began playing with some of their practices (like “vigil” — staying up late to pray). I also had the idea of teaching a class for people here in Montrose on the topic, and so I began to collect interested students.

I attended the annual meetings of the American Academy of Religion, the Evangelical Theological Society and the Society for the Study of Spirituality, all of which were held in San Francisco just before Thanksgiving. I had no papers to present and so I just enjoyed a week of continuing education, listening to papers on theology, politics, and spirituality. Other people might find this boring, but I absolutely loved the stimulating presentation of new ideas. And besides, in San Francisco I was able to visit with my daughter Claire and to share living space with one of her street friends taking a step toward new life.

Just prior to these meetings I had received a notice from the marketing department of Zondervan publishing regarding the *Four Views of Christian Spirituality* book. I already had suspicions that the world of publishing had changed in the past few years, but having read this letter I was now sure of it. So while I was at the meetings in San Francisco, I made it a point to interview a number of editors and marketing representatives for different publishing companies (they all come to these meetings and have booths where they tempt us scholars with the latest books). By the end of the week, my eyes were opened. Yes, things have changed. Bookstores are closing right and left. Most books (even textbooks) are now ordered online. One common way authors are marketing their work is to blog, post, tweet and such. Many people are not even reading books these days. They are listening to podcasts or watching YouTube videos. Larger, more technical books might be appreciated by other scholars — I did receive a number of positive comments on the the *Brazos Introduction to Christian Spirituality* by my peers — but most students are looking for a more accessible introduction. Furthermore, larger textbooks are often now assigned to students a few chapters at a time, scanned and uploaded digitally.

What I learned was that it was not just a matter of “marketing,” but even more a matter of *communication*. Spirituality Shoppe was founded with the hopes of communicating ideas to others. Our brochure, written in 1995 specifically speaks of Spirituality Shoppe producing “relevant expressions.” I began to wonder: was my default means of communication no longer a relevant expression? To make a long story short, I decided to make a few changes in my patterns of communication, and to monitor them for a while to see what happens. I could talk on and on about what I have learned so far, but this much I know: (1) I actually *like* Facebook (so look me up and “friend” me – trust me, I will pray for you more often that way), (2) I would like to experiment with audio and video communication, but there is a real technological learning curve to navigate if it is to be done well, (3) what I do naturally is to study topics and produce 20-30 page papers. I can work at simplifying this material, but it is not natural to me. Furthermore, our style of semi-monastic life with its varied seasons makes the “regular blogger” format difficult. It seems best for me to study, to upload papers to my website, and to explore a variety of forms of communication. We shall see what happens in the years ahead.

What happened within the first few weeks of joining Facebook was that I received two separate invitations to minister. Consequently in January I traveled to a retreat center in Santa Cruz where I spoke and offered spiritual direction at a weekend retreat for New Hope Covenant Church, a group in a tough section of East Oakland that I had helped years ago. What a delight to renew relationship with them once again! The second

invitation was connected to plans I already had to speak at Friends University in Wichita, Kansas. I was scheduled to speak at their chapel and a couple of class sessions in February. And then here I was on Facebook, making contact with another old friend from my San Francisco days, commenting on how it would sure be neat if we were to see each other. And then I realized: he lived in Kansas City! So after I was done making some new friends at Friends, Michael Flowers picked me up and we headed off to Kansas City, making an enchanting stop at Eighth Day Books, a bookstore I had always adored but never dreamed I'd visit. Michael and I caught up on fifteen years of life and then I sat with some of his friends as they considered a new church plant. Michael took me on a whirlwind tour of the International House of Prayer, the Boiler Room ministry and good-old Kansas city Barbeque.

That brings us to mid-February, when I should have written my next NewsLetter. By that time I had started two classes in Montrose, one at the college on Critical Thinking (the first time I had taught that class since I lived in California) and another for folks I gathered called "Water from the Desert: What 21st Century Christians can Gain from 4th Century Monks." Both classes kept me on my toes, but then something else happened. Cheri and I learned that the brother of our friend Weston (remember I went with him to PAPA Fest?) was planning on leaving for North Carolina soon. He was a carpenter and was very interested in our style of construction. To make another long story short, we arranged to have the logs we had felled in 2010 cut to size for beams and delivered so that we all could have a "roof raising." Cheri and I worked full time for over one month preparing for framing, but we were not sure the beams would arrive in time.

Then, just as Weston's brother was packing to leave, we hear the noise of a large truck driving down our road. It was our logging friend delivering three HUGE beams, right in the middle of an outdoor meeting of the ladies Bible Study. We called Weston's brother. He came and parked their mobile home on our property, fully packed, en route to North Carolina. And so we all spent around two weeks of dawn-to-dusk construction work. Hard work! But in the end we had a roof framed, sheathed and "dried in." It rained the day after we finished. This process transformed the appearance of our addition from a pile of rocks to a magnificent room in a very short time (see my pictures on Facebook). But this was only the beginning. We still had (and still have) the tiles to install, not to mention all the steps that we are completing in order to install those tiles. And after that comes plumbing, ceiling, floors, electrical and on and on. Honestly in the midst of my gratitude and awe at this project, I was exhausted and pretty discouraged by mid-April. We had made significant progress in a ten-year old project, but I wondered if (note that word, IF) it we could ever complete it in our lifetime. Perhaps we could, the manual labor and the money for the materials might cost us our rhythm of life.

Remember that during this time I was also teaching two classes. I studied early mornings and late nights preparing for these classes. I was really interested in the Desert Spirituality class. My mind was simply consumed with roof and desert. I wrote two papers in preparation for different sessions that are now on my website. One is titled "Getting Away to it All: The Place of Withdrawal in Fourth-Century Monasticism and Postmodern Christianity." In this paper I argue that the impulse toward solitude is not simply a matter of finding relief from undesirable demands or conditions, but rather is an intentional pursuit of the heart of our relationship with God. The second paper "The Pursuit of True Religion in Fourth-Century Monasticism and Related Expressions" explores a number of similarities I found between the desert literature and themes in evangelical spirituality — and this was happening just as the *Four Views of Christian Spirituality*, with my contribution on "Evangelical Spirituality" was released! I couldn't help myself. I just *had* to write a paper on the topic. And what I was learning from this study was that when we read the literature of the desert elders, we tend to focus on the fastings and vigils of the fourth-century monks; yet their real interest was sincere love toward God and others. The disciplines and rhythm of life were secondary. What was primary was an honest pursuit of relationship with God.

And here I was finding my own rhythms and disciplines in shambles (needless to say, I had abandoned my experiments with vigils). It was also now ranch season, time to help Cheri's dad repair eleven miles of fence before the cattle move in. Ranch *and* roof. I was looking at the possibility of some serious life change in order

to complete our long-dreamed addition. Perhaps I needed to surrender my own ideal of monastic rhythm so that I could simply do what lay in front of me and just love God and others as best I could. It was one of those times when I questioned a lot of things, like the meaning of life.

This brings me to April 26, Cheri's birthday. Now if you ever visit the Howard home on someone's birthday you will learn that it is no small occasion. It has been that way for decades. The birthday girl or boy not only chooses the menu for the day (on my birthday — December 20 — I selected an authentic 4th century monastic diet. And Cheri did it!), but is also in charge of the schedule for the entire day. Since we homeschooled our girls and I have a good deal of freedom when it comes to "taking days off," these days involve the whole family. Since our girls are gone, it is just Cheri and I, but the traditions still stand. So I asked Cheri what the plans were for the day. She wanted to talk. She said that since the birth of our baby goats (add that to the things going on in March) her own rhythm had decayed. This opened the door for me to speak. I vented. She listened. We talked and talked. And I heard Cheri say to me — with all sincerity — that our rhythm was more important than our home. Realize — we bought this mobile we have lived in for the past fifteen years for \$5,000. It is no palace, though we have improved things here and there. Needless to say, what could be completed under that roof would be a welcome addition.

But what Cheri wanted to do on her birthday was to take a bit of a retreat, and for *me* to do the same. So I went to my cell which had been neglected for months. Frankly I was not very hopeful. But when I stepped in, I knew immediately what to do. I opened my prayer book and recited. I read Scripture, the Psalms aloud and Old Testament and New Testament readings in silence. I listened to music. I offered intercessions. I wrote a few notes. Later in the day I spent some time studying, leisurely thinking about the questions that I think are important. Still later in the day I worked a little on the roof, not pressured by the need to finish this NOW, but free to play with our project like a kid with Lego blocks. And I knew — I was home again. I could not have demanded it, but in the process of working out her own rhythm, Cheri had also freely given me my own rhythm. We have not given up on our house, but we have consciously and intentionally chosen together to subordinate this project to the larger dream of our particular way of pursuing life with God.

Reflections

And this brings me to my reflections for this NewesLetter. On May 12 presented a "Denver Conversations" at the Renovare office on "Evagrius Ponticus: The Desert Fathers' Approach to Spiritual Formation" (which may be available in audio format at renovare.us someday). At this gathering I gave an overview of the life and teachings of Evagrius of Pontus (AD 346-399), one of the most influential monastic writers in history. For the final session of this conversation I summarized a plan for "Living in the Wisdom of the Desert Today," drawing not only from Evagrius, but from the entire desert tradition. The main points I presented were:

- Respond wholeheartedly to God's invitation to conversion and situate yourself in an environment that facilitates growth
- settle into a set of practices and perspectives that push you Godward
- honestly battle with your own demons
- keep the aim of formation in mind, but be flexible and ready to experiment
- connect with appropriate relationships
- be intentional (even aggressive) about formation, but be careful to pursue true religion

I could write a NewesLetter on each of these, but I here I simply want to say a few words about the second half of the first point, "situate yourself in an environment that facilitates growth." But first let me say something about Evagrius, for those of you who might not know him.

Evagrius was the son of a small-town bishop in late-antique Turkey. His intellectual capabilities were discovered by some of the most important church leaders and scholars of the time and soon he rose to a place of significant power and popularity in Constantinople, the capital city of the Roman Empire at that time.

As his popularity grew, his spiritual fervor waned. He enjoyed the finer things of life: clothing, public adulation and fine foods. Ultimately he fell in love with a woman, a married woman — married in fact to a man of the highest rank. And she fell in love with him. This was trouble. He cried out to God for help and found himself in a dream vowing to leave the city and “watch over his soul.”

Waking the next morning he decided to keep his vow and he left for Jerusalem where he was welcomed by a group of Christians. He fit in with them and in time he grew lax again, failing to fulfill his vow to watch over his soul. Indeed Melania, his friend, identified his spiritual problems as the root of a physical illness Evagrius could not seem to shake off. She persuaded Evagrius to move to Egypt and join a monastic community there. He did so and the rest is history. With some effort Evagrius did join, learning to dress simply, eat sparingly, and to live humbly before God. He earned what little money he needed by copying manuscripts. He also wrote out some of his own reflections on life which, as I mentioned above, became some of the most influential writings in monastic history.

Evagrius saw the formation of a monk in two basic stages. The first stage is the *practicing* monk. In this stage the young monk makes use of spiritual disciplines, accountable relationships, and careful watch over one's thoughts to conquer one's vices and to cultivate godly virtues. This reordering of one's basic patterns of thought and behavior then set one free to really get to know the creation and the Creator. Consequently, the second stage is the *knowing* monk. The whole point, for Evagrius, is to free up our mind and heart so fully from worries, addictions, and the distractions of life that we can devote ourselves completely to the knowledge of God.

Which brings me back to the point I wanted to make. In one of his writings Evagrius presented a plan for getting settled into the monastic life. In this little treatise, “The Foundations of the Monastic Life: A Presentation of the Practice of Stillness,” he describes the steps necessary to achieve “stillness” (literally — *hesuchia*, also translated “calm,” or “quiet”). This stillness, in turn, becomes the environment within which the wholehearted pursuit of God becomes possible. Evagrius here wants to make clear what must be in place *before either* of the two steps of growth. At the very, very beginning of the pursuit of God, one must establish a foundation of the practice of stillness.

But just what is this stillness and how is it established? I will first describe how it is established. Evagrius, in his “Foundations,” addresses a number of factors that must be addressed in order to establish oneself in stillness. First, one must “leave behind the concerns of the world.” For Evagrius, this means the abandonment of career, marriage, status, home and so on. “Do you want, therefore, beloved,” Evagrius writes, “to take up the solitary life for what it is and race after the trophies of stillness? ... stand free of material concerns and the passions, beyond all desire, so that as you become a stranger to the conditions deriving from these you may be able to cultivate stillness properly. For if one were not to extricate himself from these, he would not be able to live this way of life successfully.” Then he goes on to address our diet, urging his readers to eat sparingly and not to get caught up in foods that lead to distraction. Evagrius treats clothing and possessions in a similar manner. We should avoid idle conversations or excessive relational attachments. Rather we should work with our hands, grieve for our sins and devote ourselves to the reading of Scripture and prayer. This is the beginning of the monastic life: renunciation of the distractions of the world and the setting up of a pattern of life (eating, clothing, sleeping, relationships and so on) that facilitate our pursuit of God. Evagrius' point is that these matters must be addressed *at the start* of our pursuit of God, or else the process will become complicated.

And this is the second half of my first point above, the importance of consciously “situating ourselves in an environment that facilitates growth.” Cheri and I needed to talk through the whole question of our home. We needed to talk about finances and rhythms and dreams. We needed — consciously and intentionally — to choose *together* a pattern of life that best facilitated our own pursuit of God. I am not a member of a monastery or an intentional community where my pattern of life is subject to the Rule or the consensus of the

group. But neither am I a bachelor. I have made vows, “for better or for worse, for richer or poorer, till death do we part,” and those vows govern the framework of my pursuit of God. I cannot simply go off on my own pipe dreams of spirituality and leave Cheri behind.

And yet when Cheri and I talk together, when we openly share our own struggles and dreams as a couple, when we work out the details over time, we find the wonderful possibility of consciously establishing a way of life that is truly life giving. For us, it actually bears a little similarity to a monastic way of life: the rhythm is more important than the home. Our possessions, activities and relationships are consciously designed and mutually chosen to facilitate our way of giving ourselves to Jesus. We have made the choice to sacrifice some things in order to enable others.

This is what it looks like for us, for me. What does it look like for *you*? Perhaps hospitality is a primary vehicle through which you pursue God’s heart and your house is very important to that end. Perhaps you are not drawn to a semi-monastic rhythm like I am. Perhaps you are drawn by God’s Spirit to spend much time in the middle of the needs of humankind: serving the poor, proclaiming the good news, acting on behalf of justice and peace. Perhaps you are drawn to care for family and a small circle of sisters and brothers in Christ. The form of life is not my concern here. What I am trying to say is that *whatever the form, we are wise to establish ourselves — consciously and in dialogue with those who matter most to us — into an environment of life and practice that enables us best to pursue relationship with God.* This is a task that is worth the effort. I have put a guide to this kind of life-transition evaluation up on my website (see “[Resources for Christian Living](#)”) for those who want to take a serious step toward ordering their lives.