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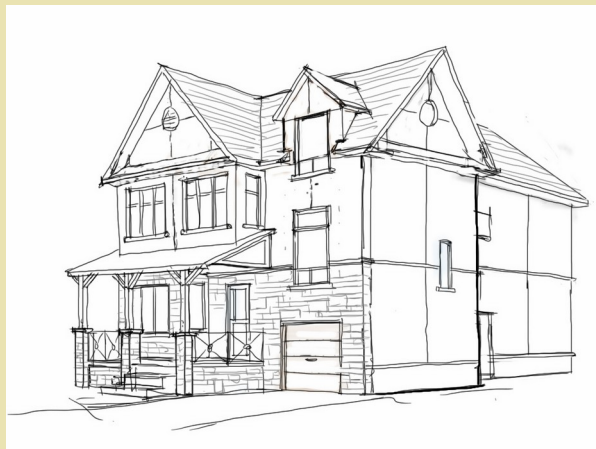
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The previous Spirituality Shoppe NewesLetter was in January. It was a story of loss and transition. Near the end of that NewsLetter I mentioned that “the rest of December was spent picking up pieces.” I had no idea how long “picking up the pieces” would take. Though some of the dust has settled, we still feel like we are groping our way through the fog. So many big changes! I had expected something to shift in my relationship with Fuller Seminary, but when they reassigned me to adjunct status (and functional unemployment) and a week later I discovered that I qualified for “retirement” (and Social Security income), I realized that perhaps a door might be opening. It took all of Fall and into the Spring of 2021 before Cheri and I had completed all the forms associated with retirement.

Cheri’s father died on December 8 of 2020. As I mentioned in the previous NewesLetter, it was an honor for Cheri and I to spend those last few weeks with him. Then came the after-death activities. It started with the coroner’s signature. Then seven months of legal work closing the estate. Claire and Caleb moved to Pa’s house (now named “The DeuPree Estate”) late December and staff from their wilderness therapy ministry began trickling in. We—especially Cheri—found ourselves pressed to clear out Pa’s stuff to make room for the new residents. The garage is still full of stuff to sort. Big items, like house, truck, and trailers are pretty much settled. Now there are the boxes and boxes of belongings. Some things are useless garbage. Others are precious heirlooms. Still others are useful, but perhaps unnecessary. Do we really need four chain saws? Cheri is currently having a wonderful time listening to all the vinyl records of classical music she heard as a child.

A few weeks later, Cheri and I were sitting in front of the fire, talking about money. I mentioned how neat it could be if somehow we could invest in Terese and Steel’s (our other daughter and son-in-law) work on behalf of people without homes. Could we somehow help them find a location that would better serve their work? Just leave it for prayer. A couple of weeks later Terese called to say that their landlord was selling the house she and her twelve roommates (some of which would be homeless without this arrangement) shared. What to do? Well, to make a *very long and complicated* story short, Cheri and I traveled to Denver on July 7 to close the deal on a better house. Consequently we are also now landlords for a community house.



A loss I did not mention was our relationship with church. The weeks surrounding Pa's death were also the final weeks of "stepping back for the time being from active involvement in the regular programs of the congregation," our church home for the past 25 years. The process took many months and many meetings. In the end, it just felt like we were no longer an appropriate fit. For a few months, Cheri and I spent Sunday mornings sitting in front of our fire studying the Bible and thinking about "church." We met Friday evenings for a while with a few of Claire's contacts, asking questions like "Why did Jesus die?" and "How can we trust the Bible?" Now we gather with a little "Jesus Circle" on Sunday afternoons with a few people at a park. We have no idea where (or if) this will develop. We wait, picking up pieces.

At the same time that connections with our local church were diminishing, Spirituality Shoppe connections were expanding. I co-led a seminar in April on Zoom for the Nurturing Communities Network. I have served as an informal consultant for the Order of the Common Life and Nazarene Theological Seminary. I have worked a bit with the Order of the Mustard Seed in the UK and attended a New Monastic training class in the UK (on Zoom). I regularly meet online with representatives from intentional Christian communities in the UK, the Netherlands, Venezuela, Canada, and the USA. This kind of thing will only increase in the months and years to come.

Ranch season began again in April. This is the first year Cheri and I have been fully responsible for the ranch, now that Cheri's father is not around to guide us. We find that the ranch is a wonderful place for the contemplative rhythm of manual labor, study, and prayer (I am actually writing this *NewesLetter* at the ranch right now). But we have also used the ranch as a place to host retreats. I have taught a couple of retreats on life-discernment and Cheri will soon be welcoming some women from a local shelter to the ranch for a retreat. Sometimes individuals come and we spend time with them working, walking, talking, or blessing times of solitude.

In July we had visitors from France. Kirsten Dirksen, television producer turned online vlogger, who specializes in YouTube videos about voluntary simplicity, dropped by with her family. They live in France during the school year and then travel around during the summers filming. They spent a full day filming everything around our house. We got to share how we have been exploring semi-monastic living. Consequently, we suspect that sometime in the fall there will be a YouTube video about us. I will be able to put a link to the Spirituality Shoppe website on their page.

Speaking of YouTubes and websites, these are two "places" where I expect to be investing more energies. I have uploaded fourteen chapters of an introduction to philosophy text to the website, a book I will never finish. Likewise, I have published a few new videos and am preparing to do more. All of this has required a bit of "continuing education" in audio-visual production, broadcasting, and website management. I am hoping to put all this knowledge together in the next year by hosting a Spirituality Shoppe class on "Monasticism and Socio-political Engagement." Wanna join?

And that brings me to my big project these days. At the very end of my last *NewesLetter* I mentioned that I was on track to finish a draft of *Deep and Wide* by the end of the year. Eight months later, I think we are still close. I have finished half the book and am now devoting 20-30 hours per week to research and writing. I have a couple of presentations to make in November, but I talked to the publisher and we are thinking about a February due date. The full working title of this book is *Deep and Wide: Reflections on Monasticism and Socio-Political Engagement*. As you may be aware, some people are very interested in investing time and energy into socio-political concerns. At the same time the idea of "monasticism" seems to speak of some kind of withdrawal from political involvement. How do we put these together?

Reflections: The Challenges of Socio-Political Engagement and Monasticism

(An excerpt from chapter 1, revised for this NewsLetter)

Socio-Political Engagement -

My conviction is that nuns and monks of old, along with committed Christians today, have a lot to offer the world of “politics.” Desert elders, monks, sort of nunish women and so on all have engaged in socio-political activities. They confront local political leaders, they care for others even if it places them at risk socially, they speak out regarding global issues, and more. But there are questions. When is the time to leave my solitude and take a stand? Can I live with the judgments hurled at me by neighbors when they misunderstand my position? Can I face my own finitude, compelled to do *something* and yet knowing my own offerings from my own small corner have so little impact? It is not always easy. Monastic communities have faced these questions for centuries.



I think it is especially challenging today. First, living in an information age, we are more aware of the range of issues that deserve attention. Many caring Christians experience a kind of overload when facing society. Policies that perpetuate racial inequities, practices that threaten animal species, questions of abortion or immigration, human trafficking; I can go on and on. These are not mere “unfortunate trends.” They touch our very sense of right and wrong. But how can we respond to all of them? How do we sustain action for the long haul? How does engagement nourish faith and how does faith nourish engagement?

Things are challenging today also because we are so aware of the impossibility of neutrality. Eldridge Cleaver said it clearly: “There is no more neutrality in the world. You either have to be part of the solution, or you're going to be part of the problem.” Yet that very truth often leaves us part of so many problems. We are, for example, aware of “fair trade” but we don’t always know which purchases are “fairer” than others. It can take a bit of work to find out and the answers are not always clear. We are informed about a few current “hot issues,” only vaguely aware of others, and almost entirely ignorant of some issues that are extremely significant (global land acquisition, for example). The breadth of issues and the complexity of factors involved, combined with our sense of responsibility to be part of the solution make confident socio-political engagement particularly challenging.

Monasticism

A book on socio-political engagement presents its own challenges, as you can see. But a book on *monasticism* and socio-political engagement is still another thing, particularly for non-Catholic Westerners in the 21st century. For one, few of us really understand what “monasticism” is all about. I have had students declare to me that monasticism is irrelevant for today because it is simply a white, European phenomena. I tell them about my visits to some of the oldest Christian monasteries in the world (in Egypt) where I was the only white person there. Not to mention the tradition of Ethiopian monasticism. One monastery a few hours south of my home had, last time I visited, monks from thirteen different countries. They generally conduct business in three different languages.



—“religious life” or “consecrated life” are common phrases to describe monasticism most generally—embody concrete means of spiritual formation, chosen in conscious distinction from others who do not share a similar way of life, symbolized through a formal and serious commitment to a particular way of life, a way of life the general principles of which are usually clearly expressed and which exhibit a rhythmic blend of prayer, work, study, and/or ministry.

These days there are a lot of people exploring some kind of “partially monastic life.” And I celebrate this. I celebrate families who live in the same urban neighborhood, who pray together daily, who commit to a life of simplicity, and who take concrete steps to follow ever closer in discipleship with Christ. I applaud individuals who meet weekly online to share how they have kept a common Rule of Life of prayerful rhythm, sexual fidelity and humble service. These contemporary “semi-monastic” expressions may be worthy options for Christianity today.

So then where does all this leave us when talking about monasticism and socio-political engagement? I think it leaves us in a wonderful place; and here is why. If all I wanted to show you were the activities of “strict” monastic expressions (solemn vows, written rules, common prayer) I could still demonstrate a wide range of engagement in socio-political affairs. This does not mean that all religious orders are or should be heavily engaged in politics. My point here is simply to show that monasticism and socio-political engagement are not necessarily opposed. Indeed they have much to offer one another. What we find in the monastic records are stories of committed hermits influencing Kings and policies through their writings, monastic pioneers who developed some of the earliest hospitals, enduring communities who sought to influence their neighborhoods for good, and so on. If this kind of breadth can be documented for strict monastic life, how much more can it be seen in the semi-monastic expressions that have flowered in history and are sprouting everywhere today. This is one reason I am

writing this book, to display a few models that can lead us into a life that is both deep and wide. Stay tuned!

May the love of the Father, Son, and Spirit be with you all.

By God's Grace,

Evan B. Howard