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The Bridwell Quill. Issues 53-56: The Monastic Turn

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The Bridwell Quill

a note from the director



January–April 2023

Issues 53–56: *The Monastic Turn*

Wandering the streets of Athens one evening in January, I came upon a man who was walking down the half-busy thoroughfare in a lobotomized trance. He was closely inspecting a handful of papers he held inches from his face and began to cast them out like birdseed before him. It was clear that the man was somehow unstable; his eyes were blank,

without a trace of empathic connection, he mumbled and gurgled and went on throwing papers onto the street. Only a few moments later after passing him did I realize he had grabbed these items from a pile of discarded personal papers, photographs, and a vintage family album from the 1960s and 1970s. It lay flat

on an old threshold in a moment of fleeting emptiness, for which its earthly traces would soon evanesce for good. Who were these people? What family did they belong to? Their blurry and vague images were now mere vanishing points in the imagination of anyone who once knew them; a blot of color on yellowed film paper left upon a grimy street, soon consigned to the wind and trash on the outskirts of an Athens refuse pile melting under an incorruptible Mediterranean sun.

I felt a random sense of loss at this encounter. These things had absolutely nothing to do with me, but in my own universe of constructed distinctions, I gave importance and value to these historical remnants, shattered pieces of

physical memories, as if they somehow meant or had to mean something to me, because I recognized those images were inexorably lost. Though, considering it now, my reaction likely had more to do with that emotive response to the destruction of soon-to-be irretreivable memories tied to personal effects and property by a stranger. In that simple, momentary,

bizarre act, this chance encounter presented a far greater concern, one which we have had to contend with throughout history: how we tell our stories and those of others, or how these are lost over time.

This experience was all the more contrasting, when

the next day I scaled the hills of the great Acropolis, only a short walk from where I had seen the abandoned photographs. Upon this regal outcrop of magnificent marble, a confluence of ancient cultures emerged into a dynamic force, which eventually cultivated a global narrative of philosophy and democracy that is still alive to this very day. The Acropolis is an awesome site to behold, and yet it is a small spot of earth in the grand scheme of things. That more than two millennia later we are drawn to the words spoken here and the actions conducted under this mottled blue sky is astonishing. Yet, the lives and memories of a modern Greek family, recorded on chromogenic film papers are simply lost to the chances of life and circumstance themselves. Our human apathies carry us forward into the



constant flow of anthropoid existence, while we are reminded by the media, politicians, and the public of the norms promulgated on these ancient hills. Life, I think, is meant to deal us such paradoxes.

There is a space between our individual or familial memories and those of collective cultures, institutions, faiths, and nations, where we are forced to recognize ourselves in the larger world. And perhaps this comparison between an inconsequential photo album left on the street (right) and the heroicism of an enduring ancient culture is either simplistic and fatuous, or the very point of our existences. As we live, work, accumulate, and grow old, we have a determinative relationship with our local and global surroundings,



which we negotiate through various modes: we often seek respect, recognition, and legacies, things tied to telling stories, narratives about memory and being remembered. Over time, and especially during the last forty or so years, our notions of memory seemed to have changed, due in part to technology. Ancient Greeks had statues that have lasted two thousand years, though many were destroyed by rival empires. Many modern societies have also erected (and torn down) statues, as causitive devices of memory: remember history *this* way, remember religion *that* way. Though not necessarily a “modern statue,” the photograph possesses its own meaning and significance as a memory device. The evolution of photography from a 24-shot camera that required hours to develop to iPhones with digital camera capacities exceeding tens of thousands of images instantantly viewable

completely alters our vision and imagination about captured memories and realities.

I now think of this distinction of images and imagination, of memory and narrative through the lens of technology, especially how our own ideas are formed, manipulated, and coerced by what is presented to us. And over the last year, this has been most present in the way I have long-considered the ideas of monasticism and spirituality, especially as these have been presented in historic texts, photographs, or television. Having lived in both the pre-digital and pre-internet age *and* the current world as we know it, it is only lately that I have come to discern the viscerality of these two spaces.

When I was a teenager, I had very particular idea of what monastic culture was, mostly based upon the writings of spiritual luminaries like Thomas Merton or Saint Benedict. The presentation of their realities seemed to emote a visual, artistic, and cultural imaginary that was highly particular and constructed. Black and white images of a robed, contemplative Merton have lived on beyond his own lifetime, and his remarkable autobiography *The Seven Storey Mountain*—perhaps one of the most influential books of my youth—crafted a story of monasticism for many in 20th century America. These things also fed into my own understanding of “the spiritual.” Yet, as with many allures of youth, these notions evolved as I had more direct encounters with those representations, going to monasteries or visiting the real spaces where Merton pursued his vocation, whether in Kentucky or

Manhattan; even in the case of St. Benedict, my idea of his life, work, and spirituality changed when I visited his cave hermitage in Subiaco, Italy.

Decades on now, I was made to think more about these conceptions last summer, when a donor gave Bridwell a Heritage Edition of the St. John's Bible. This would pave the way for a host of engagements, activities, partnerships, friendships, and other relationships that I could not at all have anticipated. And these encounters have very much revitalized my own interests and commitments to things I was very much connected with in my youth, things that I found intriguing, important, and mindful, like monasticism and spirituality.

In November, I accompanied SMU colleagues to St. John's University and Benedictine Abbey in Collegeville, MN, as part of the *Deep Dive* seminar on the Heritage Edition of the St. John's Bible. While its content was to get a comprehensive lesson in the Bible's history, the context was, in part, the Abbey itself. Situated in the mixed coniferous-deciduous forests of central Minnesota, by Stump, Sagatagan, and East Gemini lakes, the Abbey guesthouse was a contemplative retreat from the daily rush of modern life. The spartan reality of the guest rooms (right), which looked out upon the rustic woods and lake provided a momentary space to pause, rest, and reflect. The St. John's Abbey Church, in contrast, was a midcentury modern wonder of shaped concrete spareness, imbued with metaphor and meaning by its Hungarian-American architect Marcel Breuer. Yet each space, the natural and the made, both offered aspects of monastic and spiritual presence—



for further individual reflection, as well as communal gathering and understanding.

Two months later, in January, I headed to Volos, Greece—a port town nestled halfway between Athens and Thessaloniki, gradauting into Homer's wine-dark sea (below). Volos is the home of the mythic characters Jason and the Argonauts, who as the ancients believed, set sail from here in search of the Golden



Fleece. Today, it is a vibrant town with an abundance of lethargic dogs, political graffiti, and some of the world's best coffee on every corner. I went as an academic lay observer to the *International Orthodox Theological Association* (IOTA) conference and met with an extraordinary group of people from around the world. I was surprised and delighted that the very same themes I had been reflecting on, monasticism and spirituality, were central components of the discussions at this conference. Furthermore, many of the side



conversations were richly vibrant and deeply articulated by individuals with decades of experience seeking their own vocations, leading communities, or writing books on these topics. Yet, there were other elements that complimented this experience, which reading or talking could not provide: being in the physical place where image and society are so intimately entwined. Walking through ancient streets and exploring antique alleys of old towns like Makrinita with its monastery and Byzantine Museum of superb icons and artifacts (right) opens up an entirely distinct sense of religious practice and reflection that is not commonly known in the United States. Chapels of all sizes, replete with beeswax candles melting into hot baths (p. 3) and icons, can be found all over the countryside. And Greece's monastic culture is well-known and part of the national identity, most notable in the venerable Mount Athos. A final excursion among conference attendees was a day-trip to the famed monastic complex of Meteora (below). The drive was long, but the experience was illuminating. And while the



700-year-old system of monasteries has dwindled from twenty-four down to a handful, the dramatic location draws people from around the world to experience the awe of its design and the commitment and devotion of those who have continued the spiritual legacy.

Returning from these travels, I joined a working group under the Committee on Academic Programs at Perkins, where we discussed the future of the school's spiritual formation programs. My recent travels and encounters had given me fresh eyes to look at and consider the options at hand, but I soon realized that, much like the trials of understanding monasticism and spirituality within the span of time and place, we had many contrasting visions as a community on what these things meant.

Discerning our lives is done in a variety of ways. We seek to find meaning and purpose and hope that somehow we leave an imprint, a legacy. While our individual lives are important, the greater distinction comes within our communities and what they mean, but also how we participate within those communities. The monastic and spiritual imaginations that I grew up with have changed, but they have also reemerged and given me new insight into what memory means and how it acts—informed by purposeful spaces, images, icons, people, and nature. Even as monastic communities shrink and spirituality has less popular currency, they still possess something meaningful that can give us guidance, purpose, and direction. Monasticism and spirituality are tied by their conceptions of solitude, but are most powerful in their expressions of community. We live in a world of contrast, a world of confluent yet paradoxical narratives, a place where old photos and digital media meld into an amalgamated collective memory. And yet, we still seek to find meaning in it all. Perhaps it requires simply our willingness to stop, pause, and breathe in the wholeness of the world around us—as ourselves and as humanity.

Pax vobiscum! ~ AJE

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