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Discipline and Spontaneity: Discussion

Sr. Johanna Becker, OSB, Roger J. Corless, Rev. Charles Crenshaw, Jr., Dr. Andre L. Delbecq, Kathleen Dugan, Patrick Henry, Ph.D., Sr. Rebecca Hodge, OP, John Huntington, Judith Miller, Sr. Sarah Schwartzberg, OSB, Br. David Steindl-Rast, OSB, Rev. Heng Sure, Ph.D.

from **Benedict's Dharma, September 2001**

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Patrick Henry: Thank you very much, Francis. As you were talking about silence I was thinking that the single thing I heard from these authors that I will remember longest is Joseph Goldstein's recollection of the time when he submitted himself to a particular discipline in which he said, "For three months I will not talk about any third person." So when he was talking to somebody else, they didn't talk about anybody else. He said his compassion for everybody went up, because he was not making any judgments, whether good or bad—and ninety percent of his conversation was eliminated [laughter]. It's that ninety percent that I think has really stuck with me. I'm also reminded of a Zen admonition, "Speak only if you can improve on the silence." I think that what is happening here is we are hearing speech that improves on the silence. What you said, Abbot Francis, was better even than silence, which is about the highest praise that can be given.

It has occurred to Sister Meg and me, and to some others, including Judith and Yifa, that we really need to bring everybody into the conversation. The dyads are good but there needs to be some more interchange in the group here. Abbot Francis gave us all kinds of handles to get conversation going, and we can go with those handles or we can let it go in whatever way you would like. So we'll try to get some conversation going in the whole group.

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All articles by or about Sr. Johanna Becker, OSB

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All articles by or about Roger J. Corless

Rev. Charles Crenshaw

Unknown participant: Brother David asked me to repeat to the group a comment I made to him during the break, and that comment was to affirm his observation last night about the value of the Rule for lay people. I'm an oblate at St. Benedict's in Madison and work for a software company. We're growing rapidly and one of the values in our company is, "If you can read email, talk on the phone, and answer three people who've come to your door, that's pretty good." This is also very crazy-making, and one of the gifts for me out of the Rule is the notion of hospitality and focusing on one person at a time, and the ability to get support from my oblate community in that way of life since I don't get it at work, even though there are other people who are going just as crazy as I am. So my comment to Brother David was to affirm the Rule and its value to lay practitioners.

John H. Huntington: In my work with business leaders in Silicon Valley I have had a group that meets monthly and use the Rule of St. Benedict as an object of reflection on their striving in the world. I ask them to comment on what it is that they find in that Rule that might be of value to them. And the most wonderful things happen in this type of conversation. These are highly educated, highly gifted, highly motivated people wanting to make sense of their striving in the world. And so I just wanted to remark that the observation of a balanced life of work and prayer obviously is an overarching theme. And then there are all of the questions of how we are with one another. The basic idea of a monastery as an economy, as a household providing for its needs in hospitality to the world outside, is a wonderful model for any group of people who are striving together. My idea of economy, of people striving in the world, is a noble one in which people acknowledge and honor one another's gifts and look to employ them well in the common venture. So the great generosity that underlies the Rule of St. Benedict provided a wonderful foil for this type of discussion. Also, regarding the concept of the Rule as a trellis, I could not help but see again and again in those images from New York the trellis rising from the rubble at ground zero, if you've noticed.

Roger Corless: In the remarks we've just received from Father Francis, I was struck by his comment that spontaneity is not mentioned that much in the Western tradition. I think he was careful to say the

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All articles by or about Patrick Henry, Ph.D.

Sr. Rebecca Hodge,OP, is a member of the St. Andrew Catholic Church in Michigan.

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Western tradition. And it struck me that if we were to have monks and nuns of the Eastern Orthodox tradition in this conversation, it would be enriched and different because of the idiorhythmic tradition in the Eastern Orthodox, which seems to have gone out in the West a little bit, though it appears to have been there in St. Benedict's time. It seems that he lived as an idiorythmic monk, that is one who made up his own schedule rather than receiving it. In what I think is really one of the more amusing stories, he's off on his own in the wilderness practicing by himself, and a raven comes every day with some bread and that's all very nice. But one morning, no raven, no bread, and no breakfast. Oh well, that's the breaks—and then along comes a human with a whole basket of bread, saying, "It's Easter." And he didn't know that, so he wasn't going to mass, and he wasn't with the community; he was doing something else on his own. But that tradition seems to have been kept up in Eastern Orthodoxy, where a direct connection with God outside of the sacramental system is still regarded as something worthwhile and often made by people who are not priests—of course, St. Benedict was never a priest. He knew some priests, apparently, and wasn't too impressed with them [laughter]. So I certainly don't regret that in the book there is no mention of Eastern Orthodox Christians. The book is rich enough as it is, and it is helpful that it has the focus on the Rule of St. Benedict; it doesn't get too broad. But I would like to ask that as we continue this conversation we find some way to bring in the brothers and sisters of the Eastern Orthodox tradition.

Rev. Heng Sure: I'm Rev. Heng Sure from the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas and also the Berkeley Buddhist Monastery in northern California. And as a point of information, responding to Roger's comment last night (a kind of a call for an expanded set of precepts, to mirror what Brother David said was a gesolutary regeneration or renaissance of the Benedictine Rule), in fact, in the Mahayana tradition of Buddhism as well as the Theravada, there are forms already in play that are proving quite popular and do fill that need. For instance, in the Theravada tradition, often before a retreat everyone will take the five precepts formally for the duration of the retreat. They take the precepts usually in Pali, in a very formal way, and it changes the tenor of things and gives a dignity and a weight to the week that follows. In

Sr. Rebecca Hodge, OP

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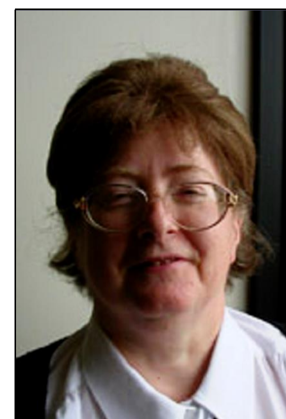
All articles by or about Judith Miller



Sr. Sarah Schwartzberg, OSB, is a member of the Benedictine Sisters of Perpetual Adoration. She contributed to the conference on Benedict's Dharma in September 2001 and participated in Nuns in the West I and II. She lives at the community's ashram, Osage Monastery in Sand Springs, Oklahoma, and is a member of the Board of Directors of MID.

All articles by or about Sr. Sarah Schwartzberg, OSB

the Mahayana tradition, one of the most popular forms of precept observance is called the Eightfold Vegetarian Fasting Day precepts, and this is an opportunity for lay people to take the precepts of a monk or nun, a novice, a shramanira or a shramanirika, for a designated period, perhaps twenty-four hours, perhaps a week, perhaps for three weeks if they elect to do so. Most commonly it's for a day and a night. The laity will come to the monastery and spend the night observing the precepts of a celibate monastic, and it's extremely popular all over the Mahayana world: Malaysia, Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, China, and in the West where the Chinese-Buddhist diaspora has traveled. We're transmitting the Eightfold Vegetarian Precepts.

There are two more sets that are just now coming into their own in the West. One of them is called the Lay Bodhisattva Precepts. The precepts number six major and twenty-eight subsidiary precepts. They're based upon a text called the Upasaka Precepts Sutra, which has been recently translated into English and is now going around. The idea is that people will observe a set of precepts for the rest of their lives that are based on attitudes of the Bodhisattva, such as the vow to save all living beings. Then there's one final set that's very wonderful and hasn't really taken root here in the West yet, but in Taiwan it's very popular. It's called Precepts for the Deceased. The Precepts for the Deceased entail someone here in the living realm taking a dedication plaque on behalf of someone who has passed away and receiving the ten major and forty-eight subsidiary precepts on behalf of the deceased. The idea is that minds and minds connect; even though the body may have been transformed, still the memory is there. You take the precepts and send them down to create merit for not only the deceased whose name you are holding as you go through this grueling ninety-minute ceremony, but also for all creatures who may have died in some difficulty, in wars, who may be wandering in the realm between their next rebirth and this mortal realm. You are benefiting them as well with the merit of this transmission, this ordination. So it's a very filial idea, and it's a kind of extending an ethical commitment beyond the grave, which I think in this community people could appreciate. Outside that can sound very strange indeed. Nonetheless, it comes from a heart of compassion, so that's another form that is quite compelling. I've done that ceremony, for instance, in Taiwan, where it's well understood and 700 people

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All articles by or about

kneel for ninety minutes on a basketball court, tears streaming down their faces, as they remember their parents, their grandparents, their friends whose names are on their plaques and who think, "I'm keeping that connection alive and I'm creating merit on their behalf." So those forms are all there; it's just that they're brand new, I think, in this language and this culture.

Patrick Henry: It seems to me that that would suggest to MID a very fruitful kind of conversation that could be promoted between Buddhist and Christian practioners who have in fact been developing ways to make these traditions accessible to a larger public. This was news to me and I think it was probably news to a lot of people here, and you say it's news partly because it's new. But it is happening, and it suggests that maybe both traditions have a great deal to learn from each other.

Rev. Heng Sure: It's a new translation, an ancient tradition that's new to the West.

Patrick Henry: I see. Ancient in tradition but new in translation, so new to the West.

David Steindl-Rast: In the Christian tradition, especially the Benedictine tradition, we always pray that God may preserve us from a sudden and unforeseen death, and so many people now have died a sudden and unforeseen death. Perhaps right here in the schedule we could fit in a modified form of this.

Kathleen Dugan: Father Francis's remarks on the nature of spontaneity made me aware of a story I had just been reading from the Hasidic tradition. It's a marvelous example of spontaneity because it speaks to the nature of its arising and about where in the long term its effects are most felt. It comes from the period when Hasidism was born. And the Gaon of Vilna, the Wise Man of Vilna, who was the highest representative of rational orthodoxy, had a disciple who had asked him a question about ultimates. And the Gaon thought very deeply about it, and he said, "I do not have an answer to that, and as far as I know there is not an answer, but I will keep working on it, and

Rev. Heng Sure, Ph.D.

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you keep working on it." And then this young man heard that around the Baal Shem Tov there were many disciples who had come precisely for the purpose of having their deep questions answered. And we remember about Judaism that, in Eastern Europe, this was the culture which prized the study of the Torah, and study in general about ultimate truths, more than anything.

So he went and he was put through a very monastic grilling. He had first to be taught by two brothers, who gave him all the basic principles of Hasidism and examined him on his knowledge of the Torah. He wiped his brow when he finished that and said, "At least I got past that." Then, two weeks later, he could go and meet the Baal Shem Tov. And he had not intended to have any particular change in his life; he just had a question. And when he asked his question, the Baal Shem Tov explained it to him, and he did it forthrightly, and he did it with such beauty that the man was entirely changed. He said he felt as if he had been truly liberated. He was then sent on a journey to go and dance with the disciples of the Baal. As I was thinking about spontaneity, it seems to me that, in that particular tradition, wisdom arises from meeting one another and from our relationship with one another, and that it ends up in dancing and being shared with the rest of the community. My suspicion is that the transforming presence of Hasidism was very much due to that; its growth was due to the fact that it had somehow captured that dynamic.

Patrick Henry: That story reminds me of the wonderful tale that Joseph Goldstein tells in the book of his encounter with the teacher who kept saying, "That's not good enough, that's not good enough," and then gave him this koan, "How do you express Buddha nature when chanting a sutra," and said that maybe the teacher didn't know, but he probably did. This was touching this very deep point of conditioning that Joseph had been told from the beginning: "Don't sing, just mouth the words," because his voice was so awful. And so he practiced and practiced and then he finally went in and he said it was a complete mess, and the teacher leaned over and said, "Very good." It's that understanding which may come with answering the question, or it may come with dissolving the question. But in any case, the connection is made and the transformation happens.

Rev. Charles B. Crenshaw, Jr.:The Abbot spoke about discipline and working—having a lifestyle of prayer and meditation and having regular work—and that's been a concern of mine for the past fifteen or twenty years, because I've lived on and off in an ashram in India and in America, and it seems as though the more time that one wants to do the contemplative meditative practices, the more work one is given. Eventually I realized, from a monastic perspective, having spent a little time at Gesthemani but not in the cloister, that the work was given because most of the time, especially those of us in our novice experience, we don't have the capacity to do all of the contemplative work and we need to do something to burn energy. But after you've gone on and on and you're older, it seems we're still confronted with the same situation, and it's an interesting dilemma.

The other aspect Abbot Francis talked about was food, and in reading the Rule, I continually was amused because of the mumblings that go on in an ashram: "Oh, boy, this food ... it's beans and rice and greens again, oh no, and it's too much garlic," and the mumblings would go on. And I'm going, "Oh, this happens in these kind of places." [laughter] It wasn't just, you know, a bunch of international people mumbling about the food; it's just because it's the same food all the time, but the cooks are doing their best. But it's a universal experience, so I was, as he put it, edified [laughter] to see that in the book.

Sister Johanna Becker: I don't know whether other people are having the same kind of responses as I am to some of these comments and experiences. First of all, I think it's a milestone to have this book in our hands. It certainly is unique, and the breadth of it, of taking these two great traditions and having them rubbing against each other and bringing forth new nuances, is significant, and then hearing these dialogues—I think it's truly, and not in the slang sense, awesome. I'm struck with Abbot Francis's treating last of all the prophet, the prophetic moment, and the fact that the prophet is usually a thorn in someone's side, or someone to be discredited or controlled. Part of the reason is that things haven't happened enough yet to make what the prophet is saying understandable. And that's exactly what the vision of the prophet contains. I don't want to make this too long, but I could go

through every one of points that we've had here under spontaneity and discipline and relate them to this kind of thing. There is something that seems to be happening in our world now that truly is different, and it's different in the sense of what's happening in the spiritual life of people, what's happening in their conscious awarenesses—which is what we're doing right now—and which is beginning to have broader and unforeseen consequences. I wanted to articulate this because I would be surprised if there weren't a number of other people here who are having this same sense of awe and awakening, and, in a sense, a holy dread of the fact that we are on the brink of pursuing or moving into a moment of which, because it's prophetic, we really do not see all the implications—but we can sense that they are there. Thank you for this.

Patrick Henry: The fact that it was Sister Johanna making that comment suggests yet another project that MID might take up, and that is each tradition looking at, pondering, meditating on, and talking about the artistic productions characteristic of it. Sister Johanna has spent a lifetime interpreting Asian art to the West up at St. Benedict's. And I think part of the depth of your response to this book is probably in your lifetime's conversation with the art of the part of the world from which this tradition largely comes. Maybe time for one more comment if we want, and then we will break into the dyads.

Rebecca Hodge : Has there ever been any dialogue about creating centers where monastics, whether Buddhist or Catholic, would set up a foundation where lay practioners could come, spend some time, learn, and then go back out, not necessarily enrolling in a monastery but developing an attitude towards discipline? I ask because I think conventional Catholicism is no longer doing that. They're no longer teaching people to pray. They're no longer encouraging people to be disciplined. So I'm just wondering if those who have the disposition and history might create something like that.

Patrick Henry: It's my impression that a lot of Buddhist monasteries and centers in this country really do that. That's part of the nature of some Buddhist monasticism, but not nearly so much of Christian monasticism. I know that Brother David, if I'm not misinterpreting him, has been championing this kind of development of Christian

monasteries as training grounds, as schools of the Lord's service for a lot of people beyond those who commit themselves to a lifetime in that place. And I think there are some centers like that ... are there specific answers to that question, just very quickly?

Reverend Heng Sure: It sounds funny for me to be advocating for a Catholic monastery, but Father Thomas Hand at the Mercy Center in Burlingame, California was at New Camaldoli in June 2001, at the Camaldoli Institute for East-West Cultural Exchange, and he has spent, I think, twenty-seven years in Japan doing Zazen as well as his Jesuit practice daily. Then he came back and began to introduce a variety of Eastern practices to the Mercy Center, which is the Sisters of Mercy in Burlingame. As he describes it, there are many Catholics who are kind of holding on by their fingernails to their faith and their practice who come to Mercy Center and are completely rejuvenated in their Catholicism by being told that it's okay to sit in stillness for a while; it's okay to know yoga; it's okay to have listened to Sufi lectures. And somehow in a miraculous way it deepens their roots in Catholicism to have this kind of exposure and, although brief, genuine permission to participate in these practices.

Sister Sarah Schwartzberg: I just want to put a pitch in for a house of my own congregation, which is Osage Monastery in Sand Springs, Oklahoma. Many of you know that it's set up as a monastic ashram and it was founded for the purpose of interreligious dialogue. It's still going, and I'm sure they would love me to invite you all.

Judith Miller: I think part of the function can be fulfilled by the oblate culture and the oblate commitment. I think there is a challenge for monasteries to figure out what the heck to do with oblates, because I've talked to friends who are oblates at other monasteries and they say, "Well, they'll come here every other month to do a program." There's so much more, so much more.

Andre Delbecq: I'd like to pick up on Father Francis's statement about the sacredness of each moment in that each moment has its own moral weight. I think you have to get into the real life of the laity. I work with executives in Silicon Valley. You could be working with fire chiefs in

New York or military leaders or government leaders. They have, on the average, seven uninterrupted moments during the day. Their day begins at five-thirty or six in the morning and ends at nine or ten at night, and often contains some very critical moments. Think of the executives who are trying to rebuild our economy when seventy percent of their employees were killed in the current tragedy. So part of what we have to do is to learn how to bring that spirit of mindfulness and that sense of spiritual presence into each moment of the executive day—how to enter the next meeting, how to pick up the telephone and pause for a moment and be present at the other end, how to enter a critical negotiation with deep listening and mutual respect. The Jesuits have the phrase "contemplation in action," and there's an aspect of that in these people's lives: we're so nourished in the Benedictine tradition by the psalms, and many of these executives begin the day with the psalter and with centering prayer. Then they have to carry—you're talking about carrying the psalms through the day of life in the monastery—they have to carry the wisdom of the psalms through the day-to-dayness of an enormously intense day. And if the Benedictine tradition becomes vacation spirituality or bookend spirituality and doesn't penetrate the intensity of the life of laypeople, then in a sense your great tradition doesn't reach and provide the depth that's needed.

We have formed a Community of Joseph that meets for three hours of intense prayer every week with middle managers and MBAs and senior executives, and they pray in the striving and the intensity of their life in the world, and they sing the psalms and then bring to prayer the reality of that world. Retreats are wonderful, and moments of introspection and quietude are wonderful, and days in which you can spend long periods of time in silence are wonderful, but we also have to relate to the rest of the lives of the laity, which is not spent in long days with periods of punctuated silence or in long periods of liturgical practice. I think some of our conversation has to turn to the reality of these people living great, intense lives and bringing God into the world. That requires a way of thinking and developing out of the richness of the Benedictine tradition a spirituality that is compatible with and interpermeates the sacredness of each of their moments in the difficulties and intensity of their striving as organizational leaders.

Patrick Henry: Thank you. I see hands going up but I really would like to stay with our schedule. I regret having to do that but I think we should ... Abbot Francis, again thank you very much—and thank you all for your comments, and we'll see you again here soon.

Continued in **Tradition and Adaptation (Benedict's Dharma, September 2001)**

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