



*There is no use abstaining from food if you do not abstain from selfishness.*

- Fr. Garrett, "Tour Guide," Mepkin Abbey

On the first Sunday in March, I went on a mini-pilgrimage with my mother and two dogs to Mepkin Abbey in Moncks Corner, South Carolina. It was sunny and crisp, lodged between days of insistent Lowcountry rain. We toured the abbey, the gardens, and I tried to walk the dogs around a labyrinth pocked with deep puddles of water only to give up and tread along the edges of the gravel road that weaves its way from the monastery entrance to the banks of the Cooper River. Four days after our one-day journey, my mom was in the hospital for laparoscopic surgery to remove a carcinoid tumor slowly growing between her small and large intestine.

You can forget how to pray. I am not talking about the Lord's Prayer, Buddhist chant, or rote rituals. Prayer can be as simple as asking for help or saying thank you. The morning of my mom's surgery, I took my usual walk with Toby and Trooper along the banks of the Coosaw River. When I first saw the stretch of water whose complexion changes daily, I stood still, very aware that the day ahead held many unknowns, and I simply did not know how to pray. Instead, I believed that moments and years of conversation with God would see my mom, her doctors, my family and me through that day.

In that same week's bulletin at church, there was a paragraph suggesting the trip to Monck's Corner. In the past, I have been in the habit of going on Lenten retreats but my job, responsibilities, time... all of those factors have interrupted the practice. With my husband out of town on a rare trip for work, I decided to devote the entire day to my mother with the unspoken goal and hope for some sort of joint spiritual encounter.

It's a bit of a hike to Mepkin; about three hours from Lady's Island. To remind us that we were truly making a "mini-retreat," I put a brown, resin statue of Mary holding Baby Jesus in the cup holder, a gift from my grandmother from a retreat she made in 1965. Mary swayed back and forth, dodging the water bottle seated beside her, as we made our way up Highway 17 and onto SC-165 through Summerville. We listened to a Josh Groban CD and made the usual potty stops

for dogs and humans.

If you know anything about Mepkin Abbey, you may know that the monks shut down egg operations after PETA protested their questionable treatment of chickens. Now, they cultivate mushrooms as a means to support themselves, along with running a small store stocked with pottery, books and religious items. Anyone can venture onto their property and stay for a weekend or a week long personal retreat.

While we were there, my mother and I joined a group of the Red Hat Ladies, the social organization focused on fun for women over fifty, for a tour of the abbey church. Decked out in purple and red and bejeweled in rhinestones (one woman wearing red, spiked, suede boots with Daniel Boone fringe), the group looked like Saturday night leftovers from Bourbon Street. I pushed my mom around in a transport chair (a blue, lightweight wheelchair) pulling up the rear behind Father Garrett, our Trappist tour guide, and the parade of colorful middle-aged women. I kept wondering what the contemplative monk was thinking as he observed this small group, foreign to the simplicity of silence, and black and white habits.

After we learned a bit about the Cistercian community, the Native and African-American ancestry of the property, and the donation by Henry and Clare Luce Booth of 3200 acres of land, we sat in church pews framed by windows, white walls, and a 50-ft ceiling of Southern pine. The altar was draped with a purple cloth. A singular piece of driftwood served to accentuate the stark nature of Lent. Guitars were perched beside empty choir boxes where, in just a few hours, monks would gather for Vespers, sunset evening prayer where the busyness of the day moves "into the descending silence."

As Father Garrett concluded his comments, he asked if we had any questions. Because this was our one-day Lenten retreat, I asked if he had any good advice for these days before Easter. He responded with the lead-in quotation for this essay – "There is no use abstaining from food if you do not abstain from selfishness."

In quiet corners of our world, men and women clothed in white and black, grey or orange, people in business suits or the white coats of medicine, people with numbers on their clothes or muted blurs of desert browns, children in school uniforms, patients in dressing gowns, men and women lying over grates or in concrete corners draped in blankets and soiled jackets, – whatever the garb – there are prayers rising at any given moment with a multitude of petitions.

In her book, *Help, Thanks, Wow*, Anne Lamott says, "Prayer can be motion and stillness and energy – all at the same time. Prayer is talking to something or anything with which we seek union, even if we are bitter or insane or broken." She goes further to describe prayer as putting "a note in God's box" and going limp after you make the deposit because you can finally breathe again.

When I stood on the banks of the Coosaw, all that I could do was breathe and stand still. I had no words. I saw light, and cord grass, and water. I knew I needed help and something or nothing assured me that whatever was next was acceptable.

When my mom and I drove home from Mepkin, not knowing that some silent stranger was growing inside her intestinal tract, she said "the fact that there are people in the world living like that impresses me." In the days ahead I would receive phone calls, emails, voice messages and texts all assuring us of the prayers of grandchildren, friends, cousins, co-workers, in-laws, aunts, uncles, hospital employees, neighbors, and customers. Even if I forgot how to pray, there was an army of angels lifting my mother, my brother, my sister, my husband and me up.

During surgery, Dr. Burrus removed the tumor along with ten-feet of small intestine and my mom's ascending colon. There are carcinoid seeds setting on her liver but a growth hormone called Sandostatin® inhibits the cancer's growth and stems the effects of Carcinoid Syndrome. There is no need for chemotherapy or radiation. If you have to choose a type of cancer to live with, this may be one you would pick.

Prayer is one of the highest examples of an unselfish act. As we move closer to days of Resurrection, baskets and bunnies, and if you are still struggling with what sacrifice to make as an effort to grow in your spiritual life, opt for prayer and go ahead and eat that Milky Way bar!

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