

FIVE THINGS THE PANDEMIC HAS TAUGHT ME

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Have you ever played that game where everyone sits in a big circle, and then one person starts by whispering something to the person sitting next to them? That person turns and whispers it to the next person, and this continues until the *thing*—whatever it is—eventually gets back to the person who started it. Inevitably, the *thing* is significantly different from whatever that first person whispered. For example, “Jim’s wife secretly loves eating s’mores with a shot of whiskey” has turned into “Jim’s big secret is that hearing someone snore makes him frisky.” So everyone laughs and wonders how and when the *thing* got changed

Our reality is similarly reshaped by the ways that we relate to life, our daily actions, thoughts, and feelings. We’ve all been struck, at one time or another, by how we can share an experience with someone else and yet react to it differently. We like to think that *our* reality is the same as everyone else’s, when actually that isn’t true. Reality is a remarkably subjective thing.

In his book titled *Always We Begin Again*, John McQuiston argues that “the human mind contributes to, and in some sense creates, the universe in which it lives” (4). McQuiston’s book is a contemporary interpretation of the *Rule of St. Benedict*, which dates back to the sixth century A.D.

The Rule of St. Benedict is a set of directions for “the art of living” (3). It is both pragmatic and idealistic, helping the reader develop and maintain a basic rhythm of life, living together with other people in Christian community. It teaches humility, gratitude, and service within the context of Christian faith and spirituality. Over the past almost-two years, I’ve found myself turning frequently to *The Rule of St. Benedict* for encouragement, guidance, and wisdom.

Since March of 2020, we’ve all struggled to maintain our sense of equilibrium, and in the process, I suspect that we’ve all learned a few important things about ourselves and our faith. *The Rule of St. Benedict* teaches that “if we take control of our lives, if we are intentional and careful in how we spend the hours of each irreplaceable day, if we discipline ourselves to live in a balanced and thankful way, we will create from our experiences, whatever they may be, the best possible life” (5).

As I look back, it’s clear to me that the pandemic has given me the opportunity to learn at least five basic lessons about living “the best possible life,” and I’m grateful now for the chance to share them with you.

LESSON #1 – MUSIC

In Psalm 100:2, David tells us to “Serve the Lord with gladness: come before his presence with singing.” Music has always been part of my life. I can remember being just 3 or 4 years old, sitting on the couch in our living room with my father’s old, beat-up guitar in my lap, and being fascinated with the sound it made when I ran my little fingers across the strings. I took piano lessons in third and fourth grades, spent fifth through twelfth grades in the band, and then majored in music in college.

More recently, I’ve often told people that working with the music program at Centre Street is the most fun and rewarding job that I’ve ever had. But even I didn’t realize how important singing was to me—until suddenly it wasn’t safe to do it anymore. And I can guarantee you that every member of our Chancel Choir was just as devastated by that loss as I was.

The Rule of St. Benedict encourages us to sing hymns and liturgy as part of our daily routine, because music contributes in a mysterious way to building that “best possible life” that I mentioned a moment ago. Music is built around two primary elements, harmony and rhythm, which are also elements—metaphorically speaking—of a good life spent in communion with God. According to *The Rule*, “Music speaks to us in a language beyond words, and the life we are seeking to live is one of harmony and rhythm” (49).

When we return to singing in church—and that *will* happen—I will do so with a far deeper appreciation of how its harmony and rhythm speaks to my soul and the souls of my fellow singers and musicians. God is always present when we approach him through a song, merging our various harmonies and rhythms into one.

LESSON #2 – GRATITUDE

In First Thessalonians 5:17–18, the Apostle Paul encourages his followers to “Pray without ceasing, and in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus.”

Over the past almost-two years, I’ll admit that I’ve struggled with the notion that we should “in *everything* give thanks.” Still, I have to believe that my life has meaning, which means God is using the full breadth of my life experience in ways that I often don’t realize or understand. And for that, I am grateful.

I also am fully aware that I am one of the lucky ones—richly blessed by God—because I really do have everything that I need. I’ve spent these past almost-two years in a warm, comfortable home with plenty of food, a cat who adores me, surrounded by books and music, and I never ran

out of toilet paper. Furthermore, I've been sharing all of this with my life partner, whose willingness to put up with me is one of the great mysteries of my life. For all of this, my gratitude increases daily.

The importance of gratitude to “a good life” appears in the very first section of *The Rule of St. Benedict*, which says this: “The first rule is simply this: Live this life and do whatever is done, in a spirit of Thanksgiving. And come to comfortable rest in the certainty that those who participate in this life with an attitude of Thanksgiving will receive its full promise” (17–18).

LESSON #3 – COMMUNITY

I am a person who prefers the inner life. In some ways, I find the word *lockdown* mysteriously appealing. In fact, I am convinced that in a previous life, I was a happily cloistered monk—and no, I'm not kidding. Some people draw energy from being around other people, but I am a complete introvert who prefers to observe other people rather than to actually interact with them. So you can see the danger in my spending day after day, week after week, month after month, pretty happily at home with just my wife and my cat.

Saint Benedict understood folks like me. *The Rule* includes a section on the importance of maintaining a daily routine, and it stresses the importance of a healthy balance between spending time alone, as in prayer and meditation, and spending time with other members of your faith community. He writes these words: “Solitary meditation or prayer, like solitary life, must be balanced with community. We cannot shift the center of our lives away from ourselves if we are too much alone” (48).

And what does Benedict mean by “shifting the center of our lives away from ourselves”? It's pretty simple, actually. In the Gospel of Luke, we read these words: “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself” (10:27). The very last line in McQuiston's interpretation of *The Rule of St. Benedict* says this: “We must prefer nothing to the art of caring for others.” This is a lesson that I need to learn over and over again—that if I'm focused exclusively on my own internal life, no matter how much I might enjoy that, I'm not loving my neighbor as myself. And this pandemic has made it clear to me that I need to be vigilant about looking outward as much as I look inward.

LESSON #4 – GOD'S PRESENCE

The Rule of St. Benedict includes a section on worship, where we find these words: “Remember that we are always in the presence of the sacred, but that the sacred nature of life is only apparent to those who are open to it” (59). We're always in God's presence, but we have to make room

for him in our hearts and lives. If we create space and opportunity, God will meet us in the middle, but he won't force himself into our lives.

During this pandemic, I've learned—I'm still learning—that I really need to actively make room for God. Sometimes I've found myself thinking, "So many people are sick and dying! Where is God in all this?" But I'm learning that when that happens, I've slipped into thinking *about* God rather than just talking directly *to* God—calling God *he*, rather than *you*.

God is always present, patiently waiting, but sometimes I allow other things in my life to crowd him out. For me, it comes down to sticking to a routine of some sort, regularly focusing on my spiritual life at designated times in the day, which requires self-discipline. But in return, I can far more easily sense his presence and hear his voice.

LESSON #5 — TIME

During this pandemic, I've found time to be especially slippery in some ways. For example, Laurel and I have experienced the passage of time somewhat differently. She finds that the linear nature of time has, to some extent, disappeared for her. Things that happened early in the pandemic can seem recent to her, and more recent events sometimes seem like they happened months earlier. In contrast, I've continued to experience a pretty steady passing of time, and I don't feel that same confusion that she sometimes has. It's a good reminder that for some people, living through difficult times can challenge our natural desire to lock the passage of time into neat little boxes.

You're all familiar with the words from Ecclesiastes 3: "To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven: A time to be born, and a time to die . . . A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance." Over the past almost-two years, we've all experienced a wide range of emotions—anger, fear, and despair, but we've also had days filled with contentment, hope, and even joy.

One of my favorite singer songwriters, Mary Chapin Carpenter, wrote a song that includes this simple statement: "There's no day that's useless." I've repeated that to myself many times over the past year, especially when I slipped into berating myself for not being more productive and "getting things done!" Time passes quickly, and life is not about "getting things done." It's only by making room in my days for peace and silence that I can truly experience God's loving presence and companionship. It's true—there's no day that's useless.

I am not grateful for the pandemic in which we've all spent the past almost-two years. But I am grateful for the opportunity to slow down, reassess my priorities and goals, spend more time with my wife and cat, and just ponder the purpose of my life. I am also grateful for the lessons that

I've learned—and continue to learn—from this experience, and for the mental and emotional space in which to learn them.

Among the things for which I am most grateful is this church—for the love, acceptance, and fellowship that I experience in this faith community, and for our common commitment to being God's hands and feet in this world. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Works Cited

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