

Thoughts on Our Urban Monastery from Your Faithful Guide

April 2021

Well...it has been six months since we formally kicked off our Monastic journey together, and seven months before that when I was convicted of my own need to embark on this adventure. Virtually a full year coinciding with the strangest, most volatile, and possibly the most perplexing season of upset in memory.

I used to inwardly find people in airports wearing masks an oddity and a little silly. Coffee shops were my friends and meeting flesh and blood people in those confines was enjoyable and life-giving. Going for a drive in the country was a treat until one had to pray for washroom availability when the coffee took hold. "Zoom, Zoom" was a media campaign for selling Mazdas and not my new preferred communication channel of choice. Speculating about what it would be like worshipping by proxy on my iPad became real as I gathered with the rest of KBC - coffee in one hand and my Bible in the other. Travel and vacation and futuring on anything that used to be routine is now met with question marks and obfuscation as we try to navigate what might be possible.

My Confession

I needed the Urban Monastery...it is why it was birthed and came to fruition. As selfish as that sounds it has been for me a lifesaver. My life is built around my schedule and datebook in order to mete out my time in an efficient and equitable fashion. I even schedule time for myself disguised as an appointment. Call that a little anal perhaps, but it works. What I did not have, as a commitment, was any corresponding set of times put away for the Lord. It does not mean that I did not have those intervals, they were just more haphazard and loosely sustained me on a personal spiritual footing.

Co-vid hit and I was exposed for what I had assumed could keep me alive and thriving. Come late April 2020, I caved in and realized the tide had gone out and what was left at the bottom of the ocean was detritus and slag and unattended pieces of flotsam and jetsam that I did not like. I became lonely, feeling bereft of community that I so enjoyed, and lacking a daily rhythm of spiritual vitality. On the surface I was fine, preaching regularly, encouraging others, and generally making the best of what I and others was sure was a temporary moment in our history. But this was only a stay in the execution as time wore on into the summer and I still felt orphaned from a sincere and full walk with my Lord.

Hence, the birth of my desire to gather with a few others and begin a journey together. It would include an assortment of the spiritual disciplines drawn from the myriad books in my library shelves on spiritual formation and practices that had sustained the faithful through 2000+ years of Christendom and countless wars, plagues and traumas that could bury the soul. Running into Phil Reinders, a fellow pastor and good friend, (a God thing) who was also on the cutting edge and pondering the same conundrum, gave me encouragement and a partner in pursuit of a way forward.

Would there be anyone who would walk with me? Was the project at hand (the then nascent Urban Monastery), an indictment and admission of our failure in church life to address these issues? After all, I am a pastor and was already feeling guilty that I felt this way in the first place. Had things come to a head in the pandemic and what was happening was truly an intervention that allowed the possibility to address my own need and conversely the felt needs of others in my orbit? I decided that it was indeed an intervention and I could turn my mind over to the possible walk into the Spiritual Disciplines.

Since then, and now 5 months in, I have discovered much about myself and my own rhythms. I still believe that we have collectively set the bar at a good place, even though many of us have felt it is a bridge too far. It has been difficult for several of us to keep up momentum and we have seen some of the disciplines as just too much. That is an alright place to be. In broadening our intentions, we find our own rhythm and capacity and are able to set our own threshold. The original set of daily and weekly exercises allowed us to stretch and try some new things. After a half a year we have likely found our rhythm and that is good. Many of you will cruise the website and hunger for even more engagement; and that is good for the soul – every one of us is different. I have experienced this myself and have come to my own peace about my rhythms and am reexamining where I need to continue to grow. In the end, the end-game is walking with Jesus and not a pharisaical stricture aimed at inducing guilt or any sort of falling short.

The lack of seeing one another face to face and the possibilities for hospitality, coffee or meals together, has been my greatest disappointment. It is the set of lenses that keep our eyes off our own myopia and feeds our need for human contact as we see God working in our midst. It is the glue that binds us to a spirit of encouragement that gets us through the dark times of discouragement and disillusionment. Better times are coming, they are almost upon us, as strictures are loosened and vaccines more prevalent, the opportunity to feed one another is right around the corner.

It is my firm contention that the church at large has needed a strong dose of discipleship to undergird who we are as the people of God. So many people have desired teaching and corresponding disciplines that reflect the overall life of Jesus himself. I trust that we have rediscovered the Spiritual Disciplines to be the means of God's grace for the formation and transformation of heart and mind and spirit and body and soul. The constant noise, constant demands, constant news, accessibility by phone and email 24/7, even affects our physical capacity for sustained attention that has decreased with the overuse of stimuli. Our life is so full of distractions, and in our internet addled world of endless possibilities for our indulgence in information and entertainment, we can miss the voice of the Lord giving perspective and real authentic guidance and grounding in what is most important.

The great theologian Thomas Aquinas encouraged his people 900 years ago by saying "habit overcomes habit". Jesus Christ will guide us.

Our Collective Consideration

In my own prayers over the last month I have been asking God to give me/us a way forward. Several of you have shared how important this covenant community has been for you. I can only guess at what everyone is thinking. Whatever shapes over the next couple of months, it will be a collective effort as we decide together what is healthy, what has been missing, what we should keep that will help us to thrive, and what we should do to alter our community experience.

It will involve a reckoning of how we will proceed through the summer and how we might reengage for the fall. **It is my intention to stay the course – this has not been a temporary experiment but a commitment to a group of folk who covenant together for our own spiritual health and those we touch every day.** Some will decide to move on and others will join – but that is a decision we hold off for the moment as we continue to move forward.

I must say, in my own conversations with other pastors and leaders, there is great interest in what we are about. The sheer paucity of discipleship and the lack of engagement in the spiritual life in the local church has been hampered by the pandemic and its ilk, and shown for what it is – sometimes extremely

shallow and frighteningly unsustainable over the long term. **Attentiveness to our own faith formation, as it turns out, is critical for a thriving Christian walk and fuels our desire to love and care for others and serve our loved ones and our communities.** It is the joy set out before us, patterned after Jesus life and given impetus by his Spirit within us. “Christ in you, the hope of Glory.”

We form a localized fellowship modelling what it might look like to live in a covenanting relationship, practicing a set of life-giving Disciplines for the good of others. Who would have ever guessed that such good thing would have come out of such a time as this? It is my firm belief that God always proceeds us into any situation we find ourselves. Where is He leading? Where are the meeting places for growth and human thriving that He thrusts us into? Are they circumstantial or hap-hazard; for the believer, never, they are always attended to by God. He guides us through all we face in this life and He will never leave or forsake us. The Spiritual Disciplines allow us to see him in the moment, daily and weekly, and through the voices and hearts of those around us.

For Perspective – as we break into Spring:

1. **By now – you likely know your own spiritual rhythm.** This can go two ways. “I am comfortable with this level of investment – and think this is what I can sustain.” OR “I am *too* comfortable with this level of engagement in the disciplines and think I need to bear down a little more in order to stretch myself.” In case anyone is feeling guilty by this set of choices *both* are perfectly good and right. The website lays out some thoughts on this for your engagement as to which Disciplines are right for you. Share that with one another in your small group to support one another.
2. **I will be hosting the second of our sessions when we can get together by Zoom and share a little of what we are experiencing as a community.** Our first one on March 31st, allowed us to hear from some folk about what they were experiencing as highlights and even challenges. It is simply a get together, where we would usually meet for a meal. This will translate into a much needed BBQ together sometime in the Spring. I can hardly wait.
3. **Please continue to meet together in your small groups** to help each other stay the course and become a “brother or sister of encouragement”, and a voice of the Spirit for one another. This is frequently the most difficult practice to embrace as we gravitate toward filling our lives with the immediate and settling into what we are hearing from our authorities - “Stay home, isolate, stay out of circulation...” The doors of hospitality will open soon and allow us to be the people of God together and not through a screen.
4. Come May, I will be **positing a summer regimen which will alter our daily and weekly rhythms** to reflect more outside options and play into the more languid experiences that we expect as gardening, walking, biking, BBQ’s and alternative involvements open up. We desire to stay the course but will amend our practices to fit the times.

I am sure there are other thoughts floating through the ether, but you have been more than generous of your time. Thank you for your attentiveness to our mutual growth and support of one another.

Your guide,

Doug