

The holy ordinary: A rediscovered passion

by [Suzanne Guthrie](#) in the [January 12, 2010](#) issue

By the fourth century, you could become a Christian without risking your life. Church inevitably became entangled with private clubs, government posts and social networks. The urge to offer oneself wholly in martyrdom never diminished, however, and a movement was born. Men and women left civilization for an adventure of “living martyrdom” in the deserts of Egypt, Syria and Palestine.

So what did the abbas and ammas *do* once they made their big break and settled into their caves or huts? Despite occasional extraordinary encounters with animals and miracles of self-generating bread or oil or communion wine, they lived mundane lives. They wove baskets or reed mats to sell at market. They made sandals. They formed collectives for worship and for selling their crafts, for gathering food and water and fuel. They tended gardens, and they struggled to get along with each other.

A monk who had been stealing the wares of his neighbor monk confessed on his deathbed, “Lo these many years, I’ve stolen your work and passed it off as mine!” “Yes, my dear brother, I know. But, you see, because of you I’ve become a saint!”

Western monasticism emerged from the passion to give oneself wholly, followed by a life of mundane work and the struggle to coexist. The dramatic flight from civilization resulted in a simple embrace of the ordinary.

My husband and I live with Episcopal nuns on an organic farm. I love my thrillingly dull life. We grow food. We pray. We love the story of the two monks: we accuse each other of making us saints.

Recently while we were all gathered around a table admiring a cross-section of radish, another new community member and I simultaneously experienced a sense of absurdity. We locked eyes and burst out laughing.

Embracing the ordinary takes some remedial adjustment. After having spent a lifetime multitasking, strategizing, practicing “triage” on my calendar, and squeezing to “get the most” out of every moment, stopping to admire a cross-section of radish seems way too funny. We’re learning how to fit less into a minute, not more. A slice of radish is as much a portal into the sacrament of the present moment as singing the divine office—but you have to show up in the present just as you have to show up for chapel.

In *A Poetry Handbook*, Mary Oliver says, “If Romeo and Juliet had made appointments to meet, in the moonlight-swept orchard, in all the peril and sweetness of conspiracy, and then more often than not failed to meet—one or the other lagging, or afraid, or busy elsewhere—there would have been no romance, no passion . . .” She goes on to remind writers that they have to show up for their appointments to write. She could be reminding us about prayer.

The monastic life is a life of appointments: meditation, Lauds, Eucharist, work, noon prayers, rest, work, Vespers, meditation, Compline. Day after day. Bells call you to gather and again to focus, call you from the task at hand to a never-ceasing appointment with the Divine. They call you from worrying about the past or future into giving yourself generously to the Eternal Present. The ordinariness is designed to help you show up. As one sister says, “We’re called to live in absolute detachment in order to live in absolute connection.”

I’m an apprentice to the paradox of slowing down to see more. Live as if the world will end tomorrow, but live as if the world will never end. Live as if the present is paradise, but don’t neglect to muck out the chicken house. Drop your sense of time when the chapel bell rings, and hurry to your appointment with the Eternal Now.

Is it possible that we’ll live to see the orgiastic consumer culture crumbling? If so, our human need for beauty might help us dissociate from the compulsion to possess it. Maybe when we can’t enjoy the cheap adrenaline rush of going to the mall to purchase a pretty frill to bring home and wear once, we’ll lose our curse of boredom. When it is financially prohibitive to acquire a glittery object to keep for a year, we won’t suffer over the guilt that our shiny thing will end up on a poisonous trash pile in Guatemala to be picked apart by sick children to trade for food.

Perhaps then more of us will rediscover a passion for ordinary. We’ll strive to practice finding the beauty at hand—in nature and imagination, and through exploration of the complex symmetry of the soul. But to absorb this beauty we’ll

need to reclaim the skill of slowness, of noticing. Each person already possesses the field in which the treasure is buried. The merchant knew to look within to find the romance, and had the common sense to sell all he had to secure that one field.