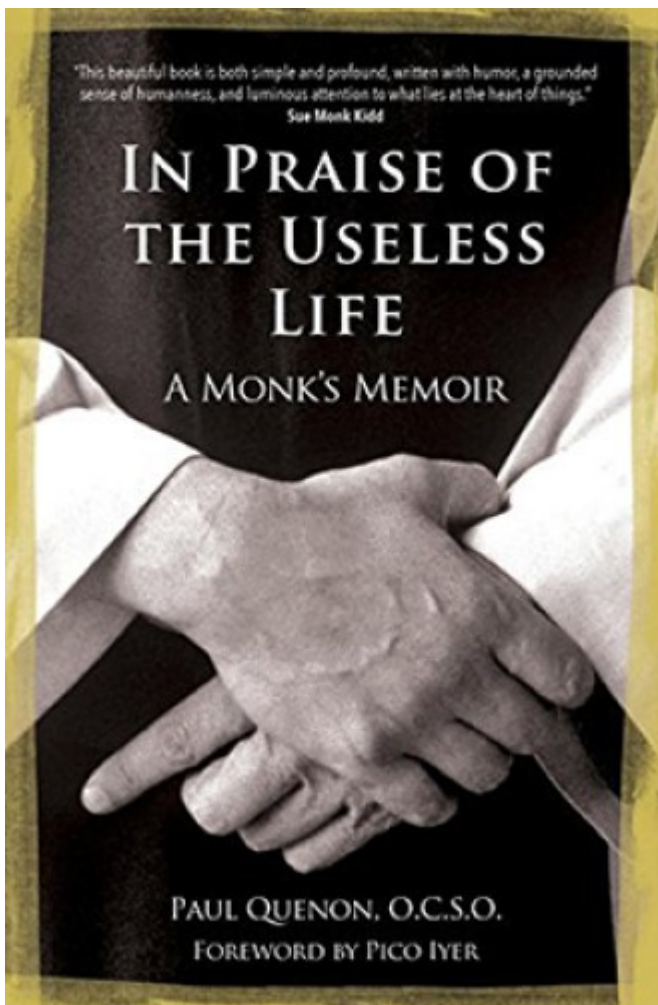


Monastic wisdom for a non-cloistered world

After 60 years at Gethsemani Abbey, Paul Quenon wrote a memoir.

by [Debra Bendis](#) in the [February 13, 2019](#) issue

In Review



In Praise of the Useless Life

A Monk's Memoir

By Paul Quenon

Ave Maria Press

"I am on permanent vacation," says Paul Quenon, who then proceeds to define vacation not as an idyllic retirement lifestyle but as vacating, "an emptying out of the clutter within the mind and heart . . . to make room for God." His 60-plus years as a monk, he says, have been "an interior journey into a wilderness to be alone, free of the world and at rest in God."

In 1968, at age 17, Quenon visited the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky and soon returned as a novice. He had read Thomas Merton's *The Seven Storey Mountain*, but it was a month before he realized that the novice master, known as Fr. Louis, was the author. At 42, Merton was 25 years older than Quenon.

Although known for a nondirective style, Merton could be pointedly directive with the impatient and argumentative Quenon. At one point, Merton told Quenon that he was "narcissistic" and should "stop looking at himself" and simply live the life at the monastery. As Quenon matured, he intentionally cultivated freedom from self-absorption, intuiting that Merton shared a similar struggle. The two men became friends, and Quenon shares insightful and entertaining anecdotes of Fr. Louis as Gethsemani brother and spiritual leader.

Quenon found that life at Gethsemani relieved him of self-absorption and more:

The monastic day provides a rhythm of change, a continual releasing, taking hold, and releasing. It is an exercise in detachment. Through it all I lose myself because I am not always in control, making the decisions; even ideas of my spiritual progress fall by the wayside in behalf of the matter at hand. Could it be as simple as this, what Jesus meant when he said, "The kingdom of heaven is at hand"?

The memoir includes chapters on the abbey's eccentric hermits, the death of Merton, and sightings of famous visitors. But the strength of the book is Quenon's description of his own monastic discipline and the structure that has sustained him. "When things are working right . . . ambition and striving fade into the background, and life lived in God is sufficient. To be alive, to move from day to day, to do the chores and greet the smiles of others is a fit and a precious blessing. It becomes radically a life of play." Within the template of monastic life—with its structure of

worship, work, and more worship—he finds that he is freed to celebrate God in collective and individual ways.

Music making is one of these playful practices. The monastic life includes singing, whether it's Br. Claude singing old Broadway songs as he chops vegetables or the monks' unflagging presence in choir seven times a day for a full cycle of plainchant. Quenon calls music "substantial nutrition, immersing me in that . . . ancient, mysterious, inward, and gently modulated world of sound." He buffs wooden floors while the organist practices, listens to Anton Bruckner before turning to *lectio divina*, and makes music with monastery guests.

Poetry is woven into his days as well. Like most of the monks, Quenon can recite many of the psalms. He concludes that "with persistent attention there comes a new opening where the heart and mind stand behind the words and they become my own." He gives the same attention to other poetry, mentioning Rainer Maria Rilke and naming Emily Dickinson as his "most soul-mate poet" who "covers remarkably well the broad range of experiences from loneliness and isolation to intimacy with Christ." Quenon has also discovered a relationship between prayer time and the practice of writing haiku. After prayer, he says, "I set myself the task of expressing in words what this precise, clear, open moment of awareness has brought me. This enhances the moment, honors our separation, and serves as transition, and I leave restored to a more reflective use of words."

Quenon also immerses himself in photography, finding it a way to explore the relationship between seeing and contemplation. Many of his photographs have been published or used within the community. He says that Merton achieved a true contemplation in photography: his photos of weeds sticking up through the snow, brick walls, or wooden slats in a barn convey a style of "serenity, emptiness, and simplicity."

One radical practice informs everything else Quenon does. Near the middle of the book he reveals, "I am in the rigorous habit of sitting outdoors for prayer and meditation." That is an understatement. He meditates outside regardless of cold and rain, and if he must be inside he opens the window, turns down the thermostat, and wraps himself in a blanket. "Inviting in the fresh air makes me feel more alive," he explains. "It is nourishment for the soul. The humors stir, enzymes form, hormones shift; energy rises from the ground, a life field gathers. I thrive a happy animal and blossom. Why not enjoy something given so freely for all?"

As for the nights, “I myself remain a night-time hermit who sleeps like a yard dog outside all year long.” He lies at one end of a lumber shed with open sides, on a “wide porch slab and under a roof.” There he falls asleep to—and is sometimes awakened by—frogs, coyotes, owls, and a talkative mockingbird. Not much dissuades Quenon from his nightly ritual.

In dark, gloomy weather, it takes some bravery to walk out to the spot, but that is part of the challenge. For the rest of the time, it is like paradise or, more modestly put, brings a merger with the ups and downs of the world around me, its dull and drab passages as well as its charms.

Quenon occasionally spends a week at a hermitage (sleeping on the porch), where he finds that meditation is almost an unconscious part of his day.

Quenon has written this book because “monks and nuns should be putting out some token of their existence . . . for others to hear. To the surprise of many, this world continues to be a place where monasticism exists, and we monks do well to let people get some whiff of it, whether they take it seriously or not.” For people of faith who live outside of the cloister, monks model “stripping away the extraneous” for the “sport” of wrestling with God, dancing while “action on earth is joined with the larger choreography of heaven,” and playing with a love of life that wants to bring the “great inner source of life forward and outward.”