Caring and not caring: The Desert Christians on apathy

by Belden C. Lane in the May 18, 2010 issue

I'm delighted to be back among the 400-year-old whitebark pine trees of the Wind River Range in northwest Wyoming. At tree line, near 10,000 feet, the bent and grizzled pines almost seem to thrive on wind-driven snow and sleet, lightning strikes, drought and disease. They stand as grand masters of sustained indifference.

This high desert country is a perfect place for reflecting on the hardy and compelling spirituality of the Desert Christians. The desert monks of ancient Egypt were old and gnarled themselves. St. Paul of Thebes died at 113, and St. Anthony buried him in the desert east of the Nile, two lions—according to legend—helping to dig his grave. Anthony himself lived to be 105. These weathered saints, who served as an example for all who followed, knew the answers to the two great desert questions: what do you learn to ignore, and what do you learn to love?

I've come here to be reminded of the indifference I need to exercise in my life—and the indifference I need to resist. On the one hand, I tend to care entirely too much about others' approval. I need to ignore it. On the other hand, when I'm not appreciated enough, I'm eaten by resentment and begin to turn inward—and a crippling indifference creeps up. The Desert Christians identified these two very different kinds of indifference as *apatheia* and *acedia*. They saw the one as an important virtue (trimming one's life of trivial matters) and the other as the worst of the seven deadly sins (undercutting any possibility of love). So I'm here, as T. S. Eliot says, to learn both to care and not to care, to sort through the curious relationship between the practice of indifference and the freedom to love.

The Desert Christians were forced to practice *apatheia* by the wilderness terrain itself. Living in the desert required an indifference to its unforgiving harshness. It meant accepting the scarcity of water, a simplicity of diet and an enduring hunger for relationship. The desert stripped the spiritual life to bare essentials, its immense emptiness eating like a canker at the root of the codependent ego.

The desert monks recognized, however, that the utter indifference an uncaring desert modeled for them could be an aid in the spiritual life. These men and women were countercultural renegades from the imperial culture of ancient Rome, having turned their backs on the values of a twisted society in which the highest worth was given to consumerism, militarism and the careful cultivation of one's reputation. They went to the desert to learn not to care about what was unimportant, so as to begin to care about what really mattered. This practice of intentional apathy about inconsequential things proved an important antidote to the egocentric prosperity gospel of post-Constantinian Christianity.

But the monks recognized the other kind of indifference too, which threatened the monastic life from within. *Acedia* was a numb sort of "not-caring" that obliterated any sense of spiritual desire whatever. Sustaining the discipline of a committed life in a harsh and isolated environment wasn't easy. The daily routine of work and prayer—practiced without any external recognition—could occasion this desert-bred indifference, leaving a monk floundering in a self-absorbed paralysis of spiritual boredom. This world-weary disgust could rob the Desert Christians of any capacity to commit themselves to life or to love—it ate at the soul.

They described this unholy indifference as a "noontime demon," striking in the midday heat of one's effort to practice an admirable piety. In *Acedia and Me*, Kathleen Norris observes that it emerges in the unraveling experience of midlife as well. In my own life, I've found both to be true. Caught in the throes of *acedia* (at midday, midsemester, midlife), sometimes I just don't give a damn about anything.

The Desert Christians knew the importance of distinguishing between these two forms of indifference in the spiritual life—if *apatheia* focuses love on what is most worth caring for, *acedia* makes caring for anything impossible. With the imitation of Christ as their foremost concern, they aimed their discipline at fostering a third "A" word: *agape*. *Apatheia* is the ability to ignore what impedes our progress on the spiritual journey, *acedia* is the deadening lassitude that strikes when we're alone in the heat of the day, and *agape* is the freedom to love that is made possible by the one and destroyed by the other.

A combination of extraordinary humility and deep insight into human frailty allowed the monks to readily identify the true self while ignoring the false self. "Most of the proud never really discover their true selves," observed John Climacus. Instead, they polish an artificial persona that they present to others, exhibiting a "limitless thirst

for praise.” They remain supremely preoccupied with what most needs to be ignored—the impressions of other people.

Evagrius warned his fellow monks of the seductive lure of vainglory and pride, the most sinister of the deadly sins. Dominican writer Simon Tugwell describes this as a matter of “daydreaming about our magnificence”—fostering an image of the endlessly admired spiritual hero, a fantasy that feeds one’s desire for self-importance in relation to others and total self-sufficiency in relation to God. To combat the temptations of the false self, the Desert Christians stressed secrecy in the spiritual life, suppressing any reputation for sanctity they might have acquired and fleeing from distinction.

Abba Isaac hid in a haystack to avoid being ordained. When spiritual pilgrims came into the desert seeking the renowned Abba Moses, he would pretend to be someone else, telling them not to waste their time looking for a fraud and a fool. Abba Motius urged his brothers to shy away from the aura of venerability that people attributed to them. “Don’t seek to be known for anything special,” he said.

A woman seeking to be healed of breast cancer asked a monk to take her to Abba Longinus, known for the power of his intercessory prayer. She didn’t know she was talking to the saint himself when he told her the prayers of the old imposter were worthless. She went away, giving up her quest for the alleged miracle-worker—and finding herself healed in the process.

The monks welcomed opportunities to punch holes in the artificial persona they were tempted to project as so-called holy men and women. They prized insults as an occasion for dismantling the fragile false self—“nothing is so useful to the beginner,” said Abba Isaiah. “Drink down ridicule by the hour,” added John Climacus. This was no masochistic impulse to self-loathing, but a realistic assessment of the danger of inflated self-importance. Being slighted by others served to remind them that their true worth didn’t rest in human approval.

A preoccupation with one’s impression on others often leads to exhaustion and depression. When *apatheia* is not exercised in the spiritual life, the tyranny of *acedia* won’t be far behind. The Desert Christians identified this malaise as a sin, or in John Cassian’s words, “a particularly dangerous and frequent foe of those dwelling in the desert. . . . It makes a person horrified at where he is, disgusted with his cell, and also disdainful and contemptuous of the brothers who live with him.” Evagrius said

that “the listless one hates whatever is in front of him and desires what is not there.” *Acedia*, warned Amma Theodora, is a sin that weighs down the soul.

The monks dealt with this problem by staying at their discipline. Aiming the cutting edge of indifference at indifference itself, they resisted the nagging impulse to give up on life in general. The Syrian monk Joseph Hazzaya was tempted to abandon his monastic habit and thumb his nose at the desert. But he conquered his despair by staying in his cell and reciting Psalm 117 over and over again. St. Anthony, when plagued by *acedia*, noticed an angel disguised as a fellow monk. The angel simply sat at his work plaiting a rope, got up to pray, sat back down again to work at his weaving, and later stood up to pray again. Told to do the same, Anthony did so and found the relief he sought.

The steady practice of ignoring what doesn’t matter so as to attend to issues of utmost importance made the desert monks a people of remarkable compassion. While vigilant in holding their own feet to the fire, they were surprisingly gentle in dealing with younger and weaker members of the monastic community. They resisted every impulse to judge—Abba Macarius was known to “cover the faults of others . . . as though he did not see them.” Some of the Desert Christians seemed almost casual in their treatment of others’ sins, and reckless in forgiveness.

Abba Gelasius dealt gently with a brother who stole a leather Bible from his cell. The young monk took it to a bookseller, who said he would need to ask around to see what it was worth and then get back to him. When the monk returned, the bookseller explained, “I had to talk to Abba Gelasius about this, since he knows the worth of these books more than anyone else. He said you shouldn’t accept anything less than a hundred dollars for it. This is a valuable book. You’ve got something precious here.”

“Is that *all* he said?” the young man asked with chagrin. “He didn’t ask about who was trying to sell it?”

“No, he didn’t say a thing.” So the young monk took the book back to the monastery and to Abba Gelasius, knowing he’d found something more precious than a valuable book: the forgiveness of an older brother.

Another elder, Abba Ammonas, was invited by his colleagues to confront a lapsed brother over his alleged moral failures with women. When the erring young monk heard that they were coming to his cell, where he happened to have a woman hiding

at the time, he quickly concealed her in a large barrel. Ammonas came in, realized what was going on, and sat atop the barrel while the rest of the monks searched for the woman. “What is this?” he finally said. “May God forgive you for unjustly accusing this poor man.”

After praying, Ammonas made the others leave, took the errant monk by the hand and simply said, “Brother, be on your guard.” That was all—no lectures, no shaming. By putting the best possible cast on the younger brother’s reputation in front of the others, Ammonas invited him to live into the confidence that he had in him, knowing that what you see in others is what you get. This is the nature of the love that the monks practiced.

The desert monks were hard-headed realists, knowing well their own propensity to sin. As one abba said to his disciple, “Brother, the monastic life is this: I rise up and I fall down, I rise up and I fall down, I rise up and I fall down.” But with respect to others, their pattern was always to anticipate and evoke the true self while ignoring every manifestation of the false self. John Climacus went so far as to say, “Don’t judge anybody. Period. Even if you see them doing something wrong with your own eyes! Appearances can be deceiving. You may be wrong. Don’t judge.” As a result, the weaker brothers and sisters quickly became what the others expected them to be. How much can we ignore, the Desert Christians continually asked themselves, and having done that, how much can we love?

As I reflect on these monks while amid the high desert expanse of western Wyoming, there’s a lot that I can ignore. I don’t have to nurture a false self in the images I present to others. I can release the nagging weariness of *acedia* that leads so often to despair. I can practice what the desert teaches about a spirituality of cultural resistance. There’s also much I can love. I can claim my own true self, free to delight in others without having to manage their impressions of me. I can accept once again the quiet discipline of attending to what I love doing most.

Abba Poemen spoke of the astonishing possibility of “dying before one dies.” Can we be free to let go of what’s unimportant? In dying to the things that frighten and bind us most, can we embrace a fearlessness that frees us to love fiercely? The desert saints would say this is how we finally learn to ignore what doesn’t matter, so as to give ourselves in delight to a beauty that matters more than anything else.