

Falling into prayer: Bede Griffith's pilgrimage and mine

by [Paula Huston](#) in the [December 26, 2012](#) issue



A woman in India prays and drops a float into the Ganges River, which is known to Hindus as the goddess Ganga. [Some rights reserved](#) by [miss millions](#).

I'd only just turned 20 but thought of myself as much older than my peers, who unlike me had actually listened to the advice of their elders. This meant that while I'd been working full-time to get my husband through college, they'd been happily matriculating at prestigious campuses around the country. I consoled myself with the notion that, unlike them, I was an adult. And that my time would come, which finally it did.

I enrolled at the local city college and arrived on campus on day one as thrilled as a freshly scrubbed first-grader, energized by the semiguilty thought that my real life, or rather that cluster of potentialities that lay like a vein of unmined ore somewhere deep inside me, was finally about to reveal itself. Who would I turn out to be? Though I had assumed I would discover this when I became a grown-up (one of the reasons I'd found the supposed emancipation of teenage marriage so compelling), so far I didn't have a clue.

My first class was biology. The professor, reedy and earnest and not much older than the rest of us, announced that we would not, as I had expected, be studying mitosis, but rather something he called "environmentalism." It was 1972, and Planet Earth was in peril, he said; if our habits did not change dramatically, within 35 years we'd

be coping with the harbingers of an environmental apocalypse.

Shocked and upset—my most profound religious experiences had come during childhood as I communed with nature, and even though I could no longer believe in the Christian God, the only place I felt close to being whole and good was in the natural world—I went home that night, sewed myself a crude backpack of sailcloth and unearthed my ancient bike lock. And for the next two semesters, I peddled to school, 11 miles each way, because knowing what I now knew, there was no other choice.

Forty-two years before my own great awakening, a young Englishman named Alan Griffiths, along with two friends from Oxford, embarked on what he called an “experiment in common life.” The three were appalled at the environmental degradation caused by the Industrial Revolution, but even more so by the resulting damage to the culture. They set out to recapture some of what had been lost by adopting a premodern way of life “primeval in its simplicity,” as Griffiths puts it in his autobiography *The Golden String*.

After some months of searching, they bought a small Cotswold cottage without electricity or running water near a village called Eastington. Griffiths, committed to walking rather than driving or taking trains, made the daily trek each day to fill their clay pitchers at the village pump. The three of them cooked meals on the fireplace: porridge in the morning, vegetable stew and cheese cut from a large round of Double Gloucester at midday, and eggs, laid by their foraging ducks, in the evening.

Griffith’s visionary enthusiasm occasionally proved too much for his companions. However, he loved the sense of being at one with nature, which at 17 had given him his first genuine religious experience, an event so overwhelming that the post-Victorian Christianity in which he’d been raised paled in comparison. His new spiritual guides were the great Romantic poets: Coleridge, Keats, Shelley, Wordsworth.

Yet at Eastington even these 19th-century poets were too recent. Wanting as authentic an experience of premodern life as they could get, the three limited themselves to books from the 1600s or earlier, often reading these in their original languages. This misty, bygone world still shimmered in the great medieval churches that loomed like God over Cotswold towns and villages. Soon, as though it were a natural next step, they were spending part of each morning, “while the porridge was

cooking on the fire and the candles in winter shed their mellow light on the crockery," immersed in their Bibles.

By the time the grand experiment ended less than a year later, they were praying on their knees and fasting, and Griffiths had begun worshiping at the village church. Where this would lead, he could not yet discern.

Not long after that biology class, I found my own late-20th-century version of Eastington: an acre and a half on the central coast of California, hours north of the industrialized harbor city of my youth. My husband and I were starting to think about kids. And if we were going to have them, they were going to grow up where you could breathe the air. School, I told myself firmly, could once again wait.

We both worked full-time to make our new mortgage payments and spent the weekends roto-tilling, planting and weeding a sprawling organic garden; we raised chickens, composted our kitchen scraps in a worm box and assiduously recycled. I learned to bake bread, served our homegrown produce for dinner and canned and preserved what we couldn't eat fresh. When I got pregnant, I dragged my reluctant husband to natural childbirth classes, and after the baby arrived we nurtured her on breast milk and pureed apricots from our trees.

Though it would be easy to blame the zeitgeist—it was the 1970s, after all—there was more than hippiness afoot.

Griffiths, 40 years earlier, was in the midst of a frightening free fall. Not long after the Eastington experiment ended, he'd returned to the Cotswolds on his own, adopting the severely ascetic life of a hermit and devoting most of his time to prayer. Yet something was clearly wrong; the more he fasted, the more he hungered for fasting. The more he prayed, the more he longed for prayer. He began to fear that in his zeal his mind was becoming unhinged.

In desperation, he decided that he must not rise from his knees until God gave him clear direction. Almost immediately, he was "carried away by a great wave of prayer," and when he finally returned to consciousness eight hours later, he had a new understanding of the spiritual life: "There is an inner sanctuary into which we scarcely ever enter. It is the ground or substance of the soul, where all the faculties have their roots, and which is the very centre of our being. It is here that the soul is at all times in direct contact with God."

He consulted a sympathetic priest—it took some doing to find a Catholic priest nearby—who took him to a Benedictine monastery. The countryside around Prinknash Abbey was still unspoiled, the white habits of the monks were simple and clean, and the daily schedule of chanting and sacred reading soothed his ravaged psyche. But most important, the 1,500-year-old monastic lifestyle helped him understand why he had for so long been anguished and confused: “It was the absence of prayer as a permanent background to life which made modern life so empty and meaningless.”

He was first baptized into the Catholic Church, then became a monk—Brother Bede—and after that took holy orders, steadied by the knowledge that here among those who practiced the Benedictine way of *ora et labora*, prayer and work, he would remain until he died.

My own free fall, when it came, took the form of a love affair and guilt-shot divorce, followed by a stint as a single mother of two, a second marriage that included stepchildren, and finally a return to academia to finish my degree. Ten years of turmoil had taken their toll, but though I no longer fantasized that college would show me who I was—though I could feel, right through my clothing, the brittle fragility of my once-hopeful heart—I could still find some peace in the miracle of sunlight and seeds.

Then, at nearly 40, I underwent another classroom awakening, this time in an ethics course taught by a Christian who recognized the sad hungers that burned within me. He introduced me to his Catholic wife, who drove me to a Camaldolese Benedictine monastery on the Big Sur coast, 860 acres of redwoods and blue flowering ceanothus beside the shining sea. After years of self-imposed exile from God, I was finally home.

Though I’d never be a nun—how could a married divorcée with four kids be a nun?—during these few hours in a wilderness hermitage, the seeking eye within, so clouded by disillusionment and regret, began on its own to drink in the light.

In 1993, nearly 60 years after he made his permanent vows at Prinknash Abbey in England, Bede Griffiths died in a Christian ashram at Shantivanam in South India. Here, after a rocky start, he had been the monastic superior and a widely respected swami for two and a half decades. The young idealist from Oxford who had once walked the 70 miles from Eastington to London in order to avoid riding the train had

become a prolific writer, a friend to the Dalai Lama and, in his role as an international guru to thousands of young seekers, a frequent flyer. It had been years since he'd worn the white Benedictine cowl; instead, he lived in the *dhoti*, the Hindu loincloth, and the *kavi*, saffron robes of the Hindu sannyasi. He went barefoot. He sat on the floor. He ate with his hands.

He was not a Christian missionary—he had not come to India for that—but he was still very much a Catholic, despite his incorporation of ancient Sanskrit traditions into the daily Eucharist, not to mention his vocal criticisms of what he saw as an increasingly moribund church. He spent two hours a day in the lotus position silently repeating the Eastern Orthodox Jesus prayer (“Lord Jesus Christ, son of the living God, have mercy on me, a sinner”). People said that simply being in his presence could open you to an experience of *darshan*, or spiritual “seeing.” Shortly before he died, a fellow Benedictine, Laurence Freeman, sat beside his hospital bed with the Gospel of John: “When I read the words, ‘This is my commandment, that you love one another,’ [Brother Bede] caught his breath and lifted a finger with emphasis and said ‘That is the whole gospel.’”

At his funeral, throngs of Christians, Hindus and Muslims from the surrounding villages laid flowers at his feet, washed them with milk and marked his forehead with sandal paste and red kumkum powder. Then, one by one, they kissed him farewell and carried him to his grave.

Not long after Bede’s passing, I went on a solo pilgrimage around the world, spending a week in India in hopes I might make it down to see his now famous ashram at Shantivanam, the “forest of peace.” This was not to be. However, the soul-sucking heat, the camel carts, the women stacking water buffalo patties for winter fuel, the roadside idols wearing *tika* powder and *malas* of flowers helped me see why Bede considered India such fertile spiritual soil. Despite the inroads of high technology, vast portions of India remain completely intertwined, in the most elemental of ways, with nature.

I was 46 when I hit the pilgrim trail; Bede was 49 when he left England to take up life in an alternative universe; both of us, in our own ways, were seeking an answer to the same questions, the questions we had not been able to put into words when, in our twenties, he moved to a Cotswold cottage without running water or electricity, and I so fiercely embraced a modern version of my pioneer ancestors’ life.

What is it about Western culture that makes it so difficult to taste God? Why would we in the West rather prove theological propositions than experience the holy? Certainly, the irreversible developments in philosophy, science, psychology and politics that culminated in the worldview we call modernism have contributed to our dilemma. But at the heart of the issue, I have come to believe, lies the unmooring of creation from its origin in God. When we began looking at nature with a calculating rather than a contemplative eye, we were, without knowing it, abandoning a sacramental view of reality. When we began to see ourselves as monads, autonomous and self-contained, we were, without knowing it, relinquishing the vision of heavenly participation that nourished and sustained Christianity for nearly 1,500 years.

God looks upon the earth and it trembles. He touches the mountains and they smoke. He makes springs to gush forth in the valleys and causes the grass to grow. He sets the boundaries for the seas and sends the rain to fall upon the good and the evil alike. He forms our inward parts and knits us together in our mother's womb. If we are fearfully and wonderfully made—just ask any neuroscientist or orthopedic surgeon—it is because the Creator of the universe has taken a personal interest in our flourishing. No wonder that in him we live and move and have our being. We are temples of the Holy Spirit, no longer imprisoned by the boundaries of chronological time; we are members of the eucharistic body of Christ, intimates in a vast *koinonia*.

What modernity and its corresponding disenchantment of the universe have cost us is nothing less than this.

Somewhat amazingly, Bede Griffiths never did run afoul of Rome ("We are too far away," he once quipped rather smugly). Though he certainly precipitated considerable controversy in both the Catholic and Hindu worlds—his wearing of the saffron robe and use of Sanskrit scripture deeply offended some swamis, and his incorporation of Hindu practices such as the *arati*, or the waving of the flame, during mass horrified certain Catholics—his writing was never censored, even that which posited a universal religion and a Cosmic Lord. He is considered by many to be an important pre-Vatican II pioneer of ecumenism, and thousands of people around the world still employ the meditation techniques he taught at Shantivanam.

For me, however, his significance lies in a different direction. I honor him as one of the few modern Christians who recognized that the loss of a sacramental worldview has seriously diminished our capacity for faith.

To Bede and me and many others, nature still triggers the primary religious experience. Bede had his at 17; I had mine when, as a child of ten, I lay on my back beneath the giant sequoias. When nature lights you up that way—when you feel as though you’ve seen, however briefly, into the Wordsworthian “life of things”—your spiritual path is pretty well laid out for you. When you finally meet God, it will almost surely be as a contemplative. One who flourishes in the wilderness. One who craves, like some half-mad hermit, significant amounts of a solitude and silence nearly impossible to find in our frenetic urban society. A person whose primary mode of prayer is meditation.

Not long after the pilgrimage, I became an oblate of the Camaldolese community and thus a member of Bede’s monastic family, vowing before my brother monks to live, as well as a busy mother, wife and grandmother can live, by the Rule of St. Benedict and the Brief Rule of St. Romuald of Ravenna, tenth-century founder of the order. The Benedictine way of manual work and prayer in a rural setting has come fairly naturally: for the past 27 years, my family has lived on four acres in the country where we grow fruits and vegetables, press the olives from our trees, make wine, keep chickens and harvest honey from our hives. Not as Luddites (the challenge these days is how to keep the dirt out of the iPhones) but instead as pilgrims on the way.

Romuald’s contemplative rule is a little more difficult to follow, given the busyness of our lives, but as the years have passed—and I am 60 now—it has become the bedrock of my existence, that which unites my beloved natural world, the roving eye within and the God who gives everything life. Not surprisingly, what I am most drawn to in the rule are its references to nature as sacrament:

Sit in your cell as in a paradise. Put the whole world behind you and forget it. Watch your thoughts like a good fisherman watching for fish. . . . Empty yourself completely and sit waiting, content with the grace of God, like the chick who tastes nothing and eats nothing but what his mother gives him.

I believe that this ancient Christian way of prayer, developed by the fourth-century Desert Fathers and rediscovered 700 years later by an Italian monk who could not imagine the extent of the assault that creation would someday undergo, encapsulates one of Bede’s most important spiritual insights:

Nature comes into being in the Word and expresses the mind of God to us, and nature is moved by the Spirit, which brings all things to maturity in Christ. This creation is in evolution towards the new creation, and man is [meant to be] the mediator, the high-priest, who unites [it] with God.

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