

My word for 2024 was *monasticism*

One highlight of the year was a busy week in a cabin with three friends and a dog.

by [Alejandra Oliva](#) in the [January 2025](#) issue

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At the beginning of each year, I do a kind of intensive, goals-oriented journaling. It asks you to set goals in different areas of your life, to imagine yourself a year into the future, to consider what changes you need to start making now to get there. It also, crucially, asks you to choose a word for the year, a North Star by which to navigate. I often go with something like *growth* or *consistency*—a vaguely corporate, aspirational sort of emptiness that I forget by the second week of January. Last year, though, some kind of clear vision seized me as I was journaling, and almost without

conscious thought, I wrote that I wanted my word for 2024 to be *monasticism*.

This was the clear vision: a life balanced between work and contemplation, body and spirit, solitude and community. At the time, I was halfway through what would become more than a year of freelancing in which the more accurate word was not *and* but *neither*. I also had some thoughts about the vow of stability present in the Benedictine tradition—a promise to stay in the same community over a lifetime, to accept that no monastery is perfect but that each offers you a place to grow. Despite loving Chicago, my house, and so much about how my life was (and is) constructed, I nevertheless had the constantly nagging thought that everything might be better if I lived somewhere else, had a different environment in which to feel my anxieties and pleasures. I wanted to figure out how to actually live in the place I was set in.

It's been a year of mixed success. I'm done freelancing, having settled into a job at an artists residency with coworkers I quite like, many of them also artists. My house and my neighborhood feel less like sites of claustrophobia and more like a home base from which I can explore. I'm still working on many of the other balances in question—between work and contemplation, between body and spirit—but then, who isn't? The moment I've gotten the closest though was a week in Maine I spent with my friends.

Missy and Haley and I started as a writing group sometime around 2018. We are now, somehow, the kind of group chat that exchanges dozens of messages and voice notes and photos and memes a day. One of the greater sadnesses of my life is that we don't live 20 minutes away from each other but instead at least two hours apart by plane. Despite this, we try to see each other once a year or so. For a while, we tried to squeeze it in over long weekends, where we would hang out, as Haley's husband once put it, "as if we would never see each other again," just furiously soaking up each others' presence.

But at our hangout a year ago, which was disrupted by illness and busy work seasons and threatened by some Texas winter storms, we discovered two things. First: that being together, even working alongside each other in kind of miserable conditions, was absolutely lovely and helped us scratch the itch of togetherness. Second: that if this was true, then why not take advantage of our flexible, work-from-home jobs, of our relatively low responsibilities at home, of each other's guest rooms, and stretch the gathering from one all-encompassing, intense weekend into

a full week of luxuriating in each other's company? Laptops out during the day, listening to each other's business voices during Zoom meetings, but at night getting to cook for each other and watch dumb TV together and yap into the wee hours of the morning.

And so, in early October, the three of us plus a dog converged on Haley's family cabin in Maine. It was a perfect week.

We all worked— actually worked, not “quiet quitting” levels, not halfway, but head-down, PowerPoint-and-email-open worked, all of us around a massive kitchen table. If someone had a meeting, they'd venture off into another room. Snacks and coffee kept getting renewed and refreshed, with each mealtime turning into a small buffet of leftovers and treats. And day after day, it felt like our time together wasn't getting any shorter—instead it stretched out, luxuriated. We had time for conversations that felt impossible to have over text, for scheming and plans, and yes, for bad Korean dating shows and stupid jokes and naps in front of a fire. I kept a tally of birds I saw from the big window facing a lake. Leaves fell; loons called.

And then, at the end of the week, each of us sick with a gross chest cold we had all lovingly incubated, we left. I, for one, was glad to go back home—to my husband and my dog, to my life as it is—and my friends returned to being people I saw mediated through a phone screen.

This was what I had wanted: rest and work, community and solitude, a life that could hold it all within the contours and limitations of the everyday. A cabin in Maine full to the bursting with snacks and friends is hardly monastic within the traditional meaning of the word (or any meaning of the word, really), but that week nevertheless lined up nearly perfectly with the vision of what I wanted for myself that year. And to have done it once means knowing the thing that I thought would make me happy indeed does. It means having left a breadcrumb trail to re-create it, to find more and more ways to weave this vision into my everyday life.