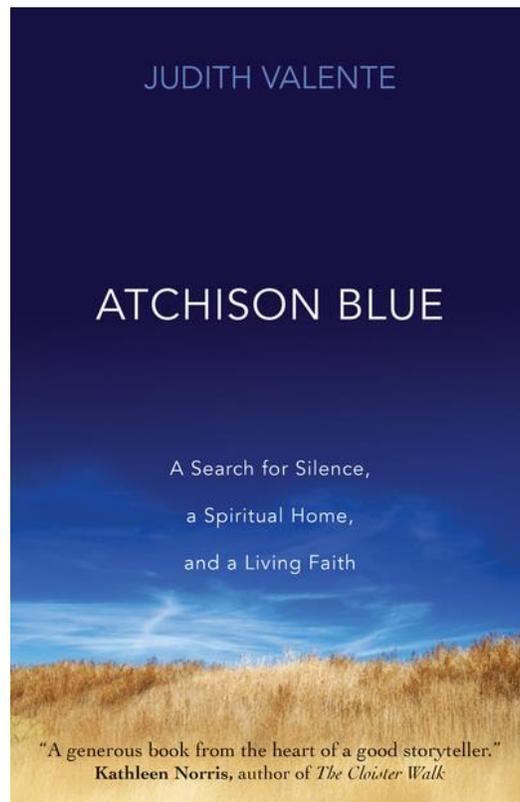


A Reader's Guide to

ATCHISON BLUE

*A Search for Silence,
a Spiritual Home, and a Living Faith*

by Judith Valente



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Welcome to *A Reader's Guide to Atchison Blue: A Search for Silence, a Spiritual Home, and a Living Faith*, by author and journalist Judith Valente.

This guide was crafted by the members of the *Heartlinks* monastery. We are a small interfaith, virtual monastery – “an order without borders” to quote Sr. Joan Chittister, OSB, one of the founders of *Monasteries of the Heart*, an online and on-site initiative of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie, Pennsylvania.

As members of *MOH*, we adhere to Benedictine values and the charism of Erie Benedictines. Each monastery is encouraged to choose a good work to focus on, either individually or as a community. We *Heartlinks* members chose to put our efforts to “Honoring the Word.”

This reader's guide is the fruit of that commitment.

Over the last three years we have read and discussed, online, a number of books chosen for their potential contribution to our spiritual lives. *Atchison Blue*, by public television journalist Judith Valente was one of those books. With the permission of the author – a member of *MOH* -- and the support of *MOH* leader Sr. Mary Lou Kownacki, OSB, we embarked on creating a reader's guide for the book that could serve the needs of other members.

Each member of our monastery developed questions for a chapter aimed at drawing out our online discussion. The result was not only a shared good work, but a process that stimulated a deeper understanding of one another and of our faith experiences, as we reflected on *Atchison Blue*.

This guide can be used for personal contemplation or group discussion. Each set of questions ends with brief observations from our *Heartlinks* group discussions. We hope these will spark your own conversations and insights.

Atchison Blue is a powerful reflection and guide to recognizing and inviting monastic values and practices into daily life, even in today's hectic world. Judith Valente's storytelling and wisdom challenged our assumptions and made us look more closely at the little things that often hold great meaning.

May our guide help you, as it has helped us, to *Honor the Word* and listen, as Benedictines advise, with the ear of the heart.

Peace and laughter from the *Heartlinks* monastery,

Dianne, Gerry, Karen, Kate, Kay, Pat, and Stef

CHAPTER 1: FINDING LIGHT

1. What is your first reaction to this chapter? What words, images and ideas were meaningful to you? Did it raise any questions? Did anything surprise you? Excite you? Concern you? Move you? Please share.
2. The author shares the story of Anthony and Joseph. Why would Anthony say, "Indeed Abbot Joseph has found the way, for he has said, 'I do not know.'"? What is your experience with knowing?
3. The author describes her life as one of talking, talking, talking, and driving herself to exhaustion to help others find what she herself felt lacking. Have you ever had an experience of representing something to others that you wished you had more of for yourself?
4. What is it like for you when you can just "be" and not "do"?
5. Judith Valente describes the experience in the chapel when she felt something *shifted* inside her. Have you ever had such an experience?
6. "I don't think about dying, I think about living." Why is this such a profound insight for Judith? Does it have meaning for you?
7. What does it mean to *live mindfully and look beyond the obvious*?
8. When have you experienced the "vital, compassionate Church of the gospels"? Where is the tie to Benedictine spirituality?
9. Please share another reading, poem, work of art, or music that expands the wisdom of this chapter for you.
10. What does this chapter mean for our Monastery of the Heart-on a personal level or as a group?

Reflections from *Heartlinks*:

My first reaction is almost visceral. In reading this account, I am transported to similar times when I have arrived at a retreat or a monastery...and felt that sense of home-ness with self, with God, with the communion of saints. It is a threshold experience where my own talk, talk, talk, meets ancient quiet and is stilled in awe, washed in tears and

swaddled in the beauty of glass and wood and river stone and weeping willow. (Kate)

When one grows older the body, mind and spirit move to another level than before. I am in my mid-70's, and feel each day is more about discovery and life than when I was younger. I value the "little" things more now. A flower, a bird, or a smile can fill me with such delight and reverence. It is simply a change from the familiar to wonder. Someone once asked if there was no heaven, would death still be a positive experience? For me, the answer is yes. I value what God has given me here, and do not fear breaking the bonds with earth to see what lies ahead. I do not have to know all the answers. (Kay)

On just "being" Stef offered this reflection:

Dawn is slowly stretching out of the night sky. I walk the same well-loved route I've taken countless Florida mornings imprinting my feet in the sand long enough to tell the seagulls I have returned -- short enough to keep my trail a secret. The Gulf is calm, a soothing swoosh of foamy blue-green against my ankles. Mumbo jumbo from last night's newscast slinks in, wanting me to abandon just "being." "Hush! See I am praying," I say. The jetties are now on the horizon. I pause and take in the wonder all around me. I see -- sparkling in the white sand -- a tiny piece of glass. "Look, it's blue!" I tell the school of fish near me. Too far to have made the trip from Atchison? Probably. But I hold it and feel a chapel in my hand. I find a welcoming rock and say aloud a morning prayer.

CHAPTER 2: LISTENING

1. What was your reaction to the wisdom story by Sr. Lillian Harrington (p. 9), in which God chose the Jewish people as God's own because they were storytellers? Share with your group a short story that has had special meaning for you. Is there a thought from a sermon or a quote from a film or book that you carry in your heart?
2. The author shares her first experience with Morning Prayer and she employs all her senses. She notices the Atchison blue windows, the scent of roasting grain from a nearby plant. She experiences the "present moment." Did you have any special reaction to this passage? What was your reaction to her comment about being able to avoid people "while at home" and her tendency to "simply freeze them out" when she doesn't want to deal with someone?
3. Sr. Lillian does a presentation (p. 24-25) about Mary and Martha. She ends her talk/performance with the suggestion that unless you mingle the Mary and Martha inside of you, you won't be a whole person. Do you see yourself as a Mary (contemplative) or a Martha (all about action)? What would it mean to mingle both in your life?
4. Because of a negative professional experience, Valente wonders how the monastic community handles conflict. Valente writes of seeing her producer as "a never-ending threat." She questions whether the practice of *conversatio* can actually be effective in the workplace. What are your thoughts about this?
5. There is a discussion between Valente and Sr. Kathleen regarding the use of violence/war between nations (p. 32). What are your feelings about that exchange?
6. The author writes about the death of her father (p. 40). How did you respond when reading that Valente is not allowed to read a poem she has written at her father's funeral Mass because "it's against canon law"?

Reflections from *Heartlinks*:

I was so angered the author was not allowed to read the expression of the love she felt for her father. Coming from a large family I've experienced many funerals. Some have been a beautiful celebration of love and honor of the deceased. However, I can recall several when the homily and service was so "institutional" and impersonal, I simply wept for the deceased that their life was not properly acknowledged. Those most meaningful have included words of tribute and love from the family and friends. It never matters how long these take, these are the ones that touch my heart. How sad that Judith was not shown respect or consideration by the officiating priest. It is "legalities" such as this that I think must make Jesus weep! (Pat)

Writing about her Kairos prison ministry, Karen said

Being vulnerable and able to share one's own story of your walk with the Lord is key to developing a relationship with broken, frightened and suspicious women, both inside and outside prison. The motto of Kairos is "Listen, listen, love, love"...Unless we can listen to the stories of others we cannot love unconditionally.

We must seek the roots of hatred. That is why the study of history is so important. The roots of the hatred that spurs conflict and war needed resolution a long time ago, but they were ignored. The mistakes started before we were born, but even we have not admitted our wrongs and the evils done by other nations that brought us to this point. And so it goes on - more war, more death and destruction, and more self-righteous anger. Perhaps there is still time to ask for forgiveness and reconnect with those who hate us. (Kay)

CHAPTER 3: THE MOVEMENT OF THE HEART

1. What is your reaction to the wisdom story about Christ stopping by for a visit? Did you find it humorous, shocking, or too close for comfort? Why?
2. When the young sisters from Africa arrived to finish their college degrees, they knelt on the floor in front of the Benedictines in gratitude. Valente noted that this is contrary to the dictates of American culture. After thinking about it, she realizes that it might be a good thing. What is your reaction to this statement?
3. To whom would you kneel and why?
4. The Benedictines value leisure time as part of monastic life. Do you easily make time for leisure in your life? If not, why not? How can you make positive strides in your life to value leisure? Are you uncomfortable in taking time for leisure?
5. Valente feels that Mary should have shown anger at finding herself pregnant (p.49). Do you agree? Why or why not?
6. There was a tragic accident near Atchison involving a young male student at the college. The sisters and the community had difficulty dealing with the loss. How do you react when a child or young person dies? Why do you think there seems to be a universal fear or resentment of death?
7. In recent years, many have said that Christ has been left out of Christmas. Do you agree? Valente felt she understood Christmas more from being in Atchison. Why? How can you make this a more meaningful holiday with your loved ones?
8. The monastics have a tradition of asking for forgiveness (led by the prioress). How do you react to this tradition of asking for and giving forgiveness? Does it have a place in your family life or in your *MOH* or small faith community? If so, how can it be done?
9. The sisters set aside one Sunday a month for silence. No one speaks until the evening meal. Do you crave silence in your life or do you find it uncomfortable? Why is silence important?

10. Valente includes a quote from Thomas Merton, "There is so much talking that goes on that it is utterly useless. It is in the sky, the sea, the redwoods that you will find answers." Do you ever wish you could just turn off the phone and all the chatter around you? What positive steps can you take in your life to allow more silence?
11. Monastic life asks one to remove the nonessential. Do you think our culture places too much emphasis on accumulating things? What steps do you, or can you, take to focus more on giving than accumulating?
12. Atchison, like so many communities has experienced economic ups and downs, and difficulties dealing with a diverse population. What are some of the ways your community, church or area deals with these issues? Can you suggest ways your group can make a difference?

Reflections from *Heartlinks*:

I have had a taste of the Benedictine hospitality and real-worldliness and creativity and support for one another. There was an Advent vigil last night that included a performative response to the Gospel on John the Baptist. One of the sisters led the performance, but beside her was another sister with flowing white hair, a yellow gown and a beaded headband accenting the performance with percussion -- a gong, chimes and a drum. It was both powerful and absurd -- and I mean that in the best way. Afterward, several of their sisters went up to the pair and bowed, and one threw both arms in the air. Yes!

The Benedictine sisters are teaching me how to be ageless, free of societal expectation, how to let inner beauty shine, and let humor and openness cast out judgment. (Kate)

It often comes as a shock to me that protestant church members can be so difficult when dealing with issues around diverse populations. I shared with our Heartlinks group about losing our pastor when he promoted welcoming a Spanish speaking congregation to use our church building. Many large churches welcome and provide for smaller congregations that way. The only thing I know to do is speak out. I've learned that when I visit a church, what I hear from the pulpit isn't necessarily what the members believe or agree with. A hard lesson. (Gerry)

CHAPTER 4: SEEKING GRACE

1. In Sr. Lillian's wisdom story of the cracked pot, there are many insights to explore. Which character in the story resonated most strongly with you -- the cracked pot, ashamed and unaware of its own value, or the perfect pot, fully functioning and proud, the wise water bearer, or the flowers, recipients of the gift of life? When have you been surprised to find your own imperfection -- or that of another -- is a gift, a strength? The last line of the story references the word "beauty." But one could say the whole story is about beauty, and the ability to recognize it. What experiences of "seeing beauty" does this unearth in you? Who in your life needs to hear this story? Share it.
2. The description of the assisted living wing and sisters lost in their own world may raise similar experiences with you. They can be both painful and precious. Share one that brings you comfort if you can.
3. Valente's juxtaposition of the sisters hard of hearing and immersed in dementia against the backdrop of the Cialis commercial suggests something about society's attitude about aging. How does the life exhibited in the monastery challenge popular perceptions and values? As an "order without borders," how can the *MOH* model that challenge, too?
4. The author sees pathos in the suffering and perseverance of the sisters in assisted living "merely waiting to die." (P. 80) Sr. Thomasita offers an alternate perspective in the story of Sr. M. Noel's final days. What do you see?
5. "How real and yet how utterly inconceivable it is to think about the day I too will no longer exist." (P. 78) Do you think about that day -- or avoid thinking about that day?
6. Several notions of the afterlife emerge in the chapter: death as a dark movie screen; a homecoming; O'Donohue's "unbroken presence" (p. 81). What's your notion?
7. The chapter includes examples of the monastic rhythm and balance -- the holy leisure of Mardi gras and the soberness of Ash Wednesday (p. 84), the clown dolls and cross-carving -- that allow Sr. Mary Liz, the sub-prioress to remain a "non-anxious presence" in the community. (p. 86-87) What helps you maintain balance?
8. How does the author's description of the sacrament of Reconciliation (p.

87-90) align with your own experience of the sacrament? How often do we consider that our hurts actually hurt God? How easy is it for you to ask for forgiveness? Are there hurdles to accepting it?

9. The author describes the struggles she encounters in a parish setting (p. 90). Her challenges seem familiar -- acceptance by the community, dogmatic judgments about the authenticity of her faith, respect for the leader/priest who uses the pulpit as bully pulpit. She writes, "It feels as if the Mount is all I have left of my faith." Why the disparity? What can parishes learn from the monastic example of celebration and community? What can monasteries glean from parish life?
10. The Holy Thursday foot washing (p. 93) suggests it is easier to give than to receive. Do you struggle with the "art of receiving"?
11. Can a person live a contemplative life outside of a monastic setting? Sr. Thomasita says to look for God in the hottest and coldest moments in life (p. 99). Does that ring true for you? How would you answer the author's question? Beyond that, can a person live a monastic life outside of a monastic setting?
12. Monastic decision-making is based on collegiality and consensus -- sharing wisdom (p. 100-106). Why is this model at odds with most of corporate decision-making? Where else have you seen this work effectively? Where do you see the need for a more collegial model -- and what is the way to effect that?
13. The author explores her own issues of anger and forgiveness that arise from reflecting on the gospel story of the Prodigal (P. 106). What emotions and issues does the gospel story -- or Valente's own challenges -- trigger in you? What helps you?
14. Which of the images in the chapter have stuck with you? Which of the phrases did you savor? Share the most powerful connection for you.
15. We're reminded again of the Benedictine vow of "*conversatio morum*" or "conversion of life." *Conversatio* is not a quick fix, but the work of a lifetime. How is that playing out in your life? How has *MOH* contributed to that transformation?

Reflections from *Heartlinks*:

Remembering her mother-in-law, four months after her death, Dianne said: *The last four years of her life were spent in...a small residential facility in her own neighborhood. My husband visited his mother every day--unless it was her Bingo Day! Bingo prizes were a plethora of stuffed animals that she would send home for her great-grandchildren. I still have about 50 of them in a bin in the kids' bedroom. I like to think she is there playing with them in that room. Perhaps, she is.*

Gerry shared one of her own poems in response to "the day I will no longer exist":

A Stranger

*Will I be a stranger
when I arrive without
a body
or a linen shroud?*

*Will there be a crowd
to welcome me
as I step
from the river?*

*Some speak of pearly gates,
streets of gold –*

*I will want
a hand to hold.*

The author shares this dialogue: "The line between life and death," Paul said, "is thinner than you think." Not only do I believe this, but also believe sometimes there is no line at all. (Stef)

I have struggled with the "art of receiving" much of my life because I had built a shell around me to protect myself from disrespect and abuse. But since I met my husband, he has shown me that his love language is giving gifts. Not necessarily materials gifts. In fact, most of the time these gifts are gifts of service or small intentional acts that make my life more comfortable or easier. At first, I was puzzled about this because I had never been treated so graciously. If you live with someone who anticipates and fills your needs it can be unsettling. But after eight and a half years of marriage, not only have I learned to say thank you but also to tell him how much his thoughtfulness means to me. (Karen)

CHAPTER 5: THE INTERIOR LIFE

1. What is your first reaction to this chapter? What words, images and ideas were meaningful to you? Did it raise any questions? Did anything surprise you? Excite you? Concern you? Move you?
2. We read the *Wisdom Story of the Woodcarver* as told by Sister Lillian: Khing, the master carver after seven days of fasting is not distracted. He has a single thought, the bell stand. What do you see for yourself in this method of freedom from distraction? What do you do to access your "interior life?"
3. Do you remember the ad for Lipton Tea, "the pause that refreshes?" The description of the mid-afternoon tea break that Judith describes in her London office brings to mind that ad. Describe how you take a "pause that refreshes." How often do you do that?
4. Judith describes the African bushmen serving as safari guides taking a break to "wait for their souls to catch up with them on their journey." When do you need to do that?
5. St. John of the Cross is quoted as describing the contemplative life in paradoxical terms: everything vs. nothing (p.119). For example, "in order to have pleasure in everything, desire to have pleasure in nothing." Does this appeal to you? If so explain how.
6. "The cracks in our lives are what let in light." (p. 120) is seen as a paraphrase of St. Paul's letter to the Corinthians. Describe some of the cracks in your life that have let in light. Try Googling the entire sentence: "The cracks in our lives are what let in light."
7. In a moment of anger and frustration the author recalls a definition of contemplation "Be where you are, and do what you're doing" (p. 130). What and where are the keys to your interior life. When did you discover them? Are you still searching?
8. Please share another reading, poem, work of art, or music that expands the wisdom of this chapter for you?
9. What does this chapter mean for our *Monastery of the Heart* – on a personal level or as a group?

Reflections from *Heartlinks*:

Although I am a people person I definitely need time apart for my soul to catch up with my body! I find that when I create these breaks, the names of those I've promised to pray for come to mind. As if an angel is reminding me of those I want to lift up in prayer. (Gerry)

Three responses on accessing the "interior life":

Nightly, I awaken near 3:00 in the morning as if by a wisp of sound...something like pulses of melodic energy...I like thinking of it as the music of the spheres...After saying a prayer for whomever has come to mind, I am soon back to sleep. (Stef)

Matins was the first 'Hour' and the longest and was prayed in the wee hours of the morning... I consider these 'wake-up' calls in the middle of the night, now -- my own Benedictine 'bells' to Matins. I find these night times of wakefulness to be times of prayer...for whatever the Spirit whispers in my heart. (Dianne)

When I attended Sufi University several years ago, we were told that the hours between 2 and 4 a.m. were the hours when "the veil" between the two worlds was the thinnest-therefore an optimal time to pray or meditate; that God does "call to us in the night," and thus Matins is a practice, in one form or another, of all the major religions. (Pat)

CHAPTER 6: *CONVERSATIO*/THE CONSTANT TURNING

1. What is your first reaction to this chapter? What words, images and ideas were meaningful to you? Did it raise any questions? Did anything surprise you? Excite you? Concern you? Move you?
2. *A Young Monk and His Elder* is a familiar wisdom story and essential to the Benedictine path. What "fall . . . rise . . . fall . . . rise" events have helped you along your journey (p.133)?
3. The phrase "God's unerring sense of humor" often explains the paradoxical situations in life. These often take years to understand. Is there such a hard-learned lesson that now makes you smile in your life (p.134-137)?
4. The sisters of Atchison celebrate life at the moment of death. Each remembrance is an invitation to go forward with living. How did the description of the death/funeral of Sister Phyllis affect you (p. 138-147)? What memories/insights did this bring forth? "Our actions are our only true belongings." (Thich Nhat Hanh) Do you agree?
5. The letter from Annick was a "miracle for Judith Valente (p. 149-153). Who have you "left forgotten" that may need to know you have never stopped loving him/her? You cannot undo the past, but how can you move forward?
6. During the winemaking adventure (p. 154), Sr. Judith Sutera explains how to tell when a grape is ripe: "The ripe ones are translucent; the light goes right through them." Who are those "ripe" with the light of Christ in your life?
7. What do you think of Sr. Thomasita's suggestion of inserting your name in 1 Corinthians 1-13 (p. 165-167)? Can you do it? Can you read it out loud? How does it make you feel?
8. The ceremony of final profession is both simple and profound. Sr. Elizabeth said it was for her it "was giving her life over to the radical unknown." How have you done this in your own life?
9. Please share another reading, poem, work of art, or music that expands the wisdom of this chapter for you.

10. What does this chapter mean on a personal level, as a group, or as a member of an *MOH* community?

Reflections from *Heartlinks*:

I do believe there are people sent to be our companions on the journey. A good friend of more than 20 years accompanied me through a period of "becoming." Had he not stood by me I would have shoveled more dirt on top of feelings; I would have talked myself into settling for what I could do, rather than summoning the courage to try what I could not do, what I thought I had "no right" to do...Even when I sensed that he had something important to teach me, and tried to push him away...he simply took my hand and said, "I'm not going anywhere." (Kate)

My goal was to teach, and the rest was where God led me. I remember consciously praying at each turn in the road, "I don't really know how to do this, but if this is what you want from me then make it happen. Get me to the right people, and I'll do it." The result of that prayer...has been a wonderful and interesting life, filled with challenges that forced me to grow in directions I couldn't have imagined. (Pat)

CHAPTER 7: THE MONASTERY OF THE HEART AND POSTSCRIPT

1. What is your first reaction to this chapter? What words, images, and ideas were meaningful to you? Did it raise any questions? Did anything surprise you? Excite you? Concern you? Move you? Please share.
2. "The Abbot and the Rabbi" is a wisdom story found in many traditions. At its core are Sr. Joan Chittister's words, "Benedictine spirituality is God-with-us everywhere at every moment." What comes forth from deep within you when you sit with this story?
3. It is likely that each of us is faced with her own variation on the theme of "Judith-Valente-and-her-stepdaughters." Have you any insights similar to the author's (p. 175) when you shift your vision from one way of seeing your situation to another?
4. Consider writing your own personal postscript: In accompanying the author on her search for a living faith, how you are no longer the same person you were when you began this book?
5. The concept of "the pilgrim" is continually presenting itself to us in books like *The Monastery of the Heart* (Sr. Joan Chittister, OSB) and *Atchison Blue*. Often we crave support that we are being heard as we live our pilgrimage. On their homepage the sisters at Mount St. Scholastica have a standing offer to pray for you: <http://mountosb.org>. What will you ask for yourself or for your *MOH* group?
6. Please share another reading, poem, work of art, or music that expands the wisdom of this chapter for you.
7. What does this chapter mean for you as a member of *MOH* -- on a personal level or as a group?

Reflections from *Heartlinks*:

God/Jesus is in every one of us. The homeless veteran living under the overpass is sacred. The wealthy banker is sacred. The gang member is sacred. The serial killer is sacred. All of us are a part of God. We have faults and behaviors that harm others; but we are still part of God. (Kay)

Sometimes --while riding in a car -- and passing an obviously homeless person, I silently greet Christ in them. I volunteer at a place which provides housing and a fresh start to homeless parents and children. I pray -- a lot -- during the night for all kinds of "homelessness." (Dianne)

It's the great swath of continuity that often warms me - and the remembrance of Judith Valente's remarks, "I've learned to appreciate where I am in any given moment. It is enough to simply live my life and love the people I love." (Stef)