

*prologue:  
my call to the  
garden*

Seasons of My Life

When I was a child I loved to play under the wild hemlock tree at the edge of our yard, beyond the careful symmetry of the blue spruces planted all in a row at the edge of the lawn. I spent endless hours playing there under its sweeping, graceful green branches. Sometimes my little brother joined me, but mostly I played alone. I loved its carpet of tiny,

soft, brown fallen hemlock needles. The roots were mountain ridges when I dreamed of being an Aztec princess; the clefts between them were the deep valleys. It was an enchanted place.

When I was a little older, perhaps about eight or ten, the hemlock came down one night in a huge storm of rain and wind.

My safe refuge, my giant friend, my playfellow, was suddenly gone. It lay outstretched in death, its roots all torn up in a huge, flat, shallow crust of root and earth and bits of rock.

Still my dreams continued, but now they came from books. *To Kill a Mockingbird* was all the rage, and I dreamed of becoming a lawyer, working hard for the poor, the unjustly accused, the innocent.

And then I went to high school, where I felt awkward and alone, a farm girl who loved books, long solitary walks, and conversations about politics with a few friends. Maybe others beyond my circle liked these things, too, but if so, they didn't talk about them. Nor did I. I knew I was supposed to like boys (well, that was okay!) and loud music and parties and sports, and surreptitious smoking in the girls' room. I tried hard to fit into all this, and sometimes I even almost convinced myself I did fit in; but in truth, it was deadly. All that peer pressure that kids exert on one another can be fatal if you don't fit.

This alone wouldn't have been so bad if I had another mold to fit into. But what mold? What shape? I wasn't raised Catholic, or even religious, though I was sporadically sent to Sunday school. I'd never heard of monastics or monasteries. I'm

not sure I even realized there was such a thing as the Catholic Church, at least not until one was built in our town when I was in junior high. Even then, all I knew were old bits of foolishness, and nothing of the reality.

So my dreams continued, safely locked in my head, far away from the scornful gaze of peers and family. Then in my senior year I stumbled into a course on the intellectual history of Europe. There were only eleven students, and I wasn't bored. Even better, I was challenged. It was an intellectual awakening for me, and something more.

The teacher was Catholic, an adult convert who taught as if ideas were important, as if they counted for something. He was a teacher whose faith influenced him, and while he never proselytized, it was clear that he had a sympathy for matters of faith and spirit. While speaking with me one day, he offered me a book about a saint, a great contemplative saint, Teresa of Avila. I was captivated, entranced, overwhelmed! My heart opened, my dreams expanded, and I knew my calling.

Unfortunately, there was more to it than that. I'd fallen in love with a dream of contemplative life, but there were some major hurdles—such as not being Catholic, not thinking I actually believed in God, not having any idea of how to find a monastery or how to enter. Not to mention that I was signed up to go off to college.

One BA later, I was still struggling, still on a roller coaster riding up the hill of faith and plummeting down the valley into no faith. I signed up for a Protestant seminary, foolishly thinking these

issues could be decided by reason alone. Blessedly, the seminary taught me how to read the scriptures, and while there, the silent times I spent in the little Catholic church at the foot of the hill opened my heart to God. I was finally caught, and God reeled me in.

Convinced of my vocation, I soon entered a Carmelite monastery. Although my years in Carmel were a time of great difficulty, I loved contemplative life wholeheartedly. It was my dream, and I seemed to be living it. But the difficulties became too great, and shortly before it was time to profess solemn vows, I came to realize that God was calling me to leave. It felt incomprehensible yet clearly true.

I left, but I was bereft. Like that great hemlock, I felt cut off at my roots, upended. At first I thought I would return. But as the months turned into a year, and then two, a new awareness dawned. I realized that I wouldn't return to that particular monastery. Then, I came to see that I wouldn't return to Carmel at all. I still believed in my dream of contemplative life, but I also knew I needed an older, broader, and richer tradition than that of Carmel. Benedictine life, which had attracted me even before I entered Carmel, gradually reasserted its appeal. But where could I go to live it?

I looked at various communities over the course of several years, but in truth, I felt called to none of them. Desperate to breathe the deeper air of contemplative life, I decided to live in solitude as a hermit.

And so I came to be a hermit—by default. I was suddenly transplanted into solitude and into Maine. Though I sought the life of solitude, I didn't come to Maine gladly. In fact, I came kicking and screaming: "This is Siberia, Lord!" I came to Maine because it was a place where I could earn a living in solitude. It also had a loose network of other solitaries, so there was a certain amount of companionship and support. There was a congenial place to live in the former chaplain's apartment on the property of a tiny monastery. And yet, for me, it felt as if I'd been exiled to Siberia.

Siberia? I felt as if I'd fallen off the edge of the world.

It was unmapped terrain spiritually, too. Suddenly I was no longer a member—not even a member-in-formation—of an extremely prestigious international contemplative order. Suddenly, I was a hermit. A nobody. Living on my own, in what felt to me, at the time, like a nowhere state. While I'd never been rich, suddenly I was living hand to mouth, and just barely surviving. I was living my dream, but at the time it felt like a nightmare.

At the same time, I seemed to have nothing to hang on to, and no roots deep enough to provide nourishment and stability. My contemplative horizons and all means of "measuring" my life with God were gone. The other solitaries were helpful, but I instinctively knew I was seeking religious life in a way they were not. I floundered desperately, hoping beyond hope in my calling, my dream, and clinging to God's promises of steadfast love and presence. It always seemed to be a journey into the

dark and unknown future, a pioneer journey, in which I often felt overwhelmed by the enormity of the world, and how different it is to have a calling to solitude and prayer.

Hardest of all for me was the very uniqueness of it. It was my calling, my vision, and nobody else's. I felt as though I was taking baby steps into black nothingness. I longed to blend into the crowd, but there was no crowd to blend into. But I could only keep pursuing this dream, this journey of constantly following God into the unknown. And God kept leading.

In truth, each of us has a dream. Like Abraham, we all journey in faith without a road map. Each of us is called in a unique way, and each of us must respond. But we also need to be sure it's the right dream for us. How do we do this? We ask God's help, turning to God and entreating God to show us the path that is right for us and to keep us from the wrong path. We share our dream with the appropriate people. We learn from others who have followed their own unique callings.

And so it was with me. I had a dream of solitude and prayer. It was the right dream, but not completely right, for I also loved and sought community. For a long time I thought it was not to be found, not for me. But today I am once more a member of a community, a tiny, semieremittical one. Few in numbers, we struggle with many things: limited resources, the challenges of living together in authentic prayer and relationships, and the reality that we are still nobodies in the world

and generally forgotten by the Church at large. But we are living our dream, and so we are blessed.

I hope these reflections will inspire you to follow your own dream. Many threads weave in and out of them, not least of which is my own experience of following my call. It is in many ways unique to me. Yet, I hope and trust that I have scraped away enough inessentials to get down to bedrock—that is, the universal experiences common to us all: hope, trust, sadness, awareness, love.

While my life's journey has taken a road unfamiliar to many—at least in its externals—in the land of emotions, needs, and desires, I trust you will find it home turf. Each reflection, in some form, deals with human desire and human struggle, with human weakness and vulnerability. Each, I believe, speaks in some form of hope. Perhaps they are mere slivers of hope, but at times slivers are all we have.

There is another experience as well, which may not be common to all, at least not in the form expressed here. These reflections speak of the experience of God's presence, abiding with us, and woven into the texture of our days, often in unexpected and inexplicable ways. I believe this is a universal experience. But we may not all name it as God's presence. We may call it peace, or harmony, or paradise, or nirvana, or flow, or solitude. Or even darkness, or illusion. Or something else. What we call it depends on each person's own background and life story. But it is there, a hidden, elusive presence, open to those who choose to attend to it. If we do attend to it, it will lead us into our dream.

Perhaps you are hoping that this introduction will give you some background in monastic life, or in contemplation, or in prayer, or even in Catholicism. But I think it best for you to sink or swim for yourself. What you need to know will be given you. What you don't know will, I hope, provoke some tantalizing questions—questions that will lead you on and on to, as St. John of the Cross said, “I don't know what.” To mystery, perhaps. To your dream. To the “more” that is greater than any words can express.

I have a word for you as you begin this book: read at your own pace. Skip around if you choose. Slow down. Speed up. Most of all, ask questions. Ask them of yourself, of your life, of God.

I have a prayer for you also, and it is this: may you always have questions, more questions than answers. May you always have a dream. And may you always find Presence weedily growing through the sunshine and the hurricanes of your days.



# blessed boredom

“Sit in your cell, and your cell will teach you everything.”<sup>1</sup> This famous aphorism of Abba Moses, the fourth-century Egyptian hermit, could well have been written for January in Maine, where sitting in one’s cell is often the only option. A week ago another major snowstorm dumped over a foot of snow. Since then, we’ve had bitter cold. Except for excursions to the chapel, community room, and refectory, all I can do is sit in my cell. Even worse, I’ve aggravated an old knee injury, so I don’t dare put on snowshoes and take a walk down the prayer trail.

And so I sit today and gaze outdoors: a beautiful day, bright and sunny, but bitter cold. I see the beech boughs waving in the brisk northwest wind; I see the buds for next year’s growth at their

tips. A long time before those buds will unfurl! Occasional snow devils, kicked up by the wind, whirl around the old blueberry field. The snow is blindingly white. The pines look cold in the wind; their needles are pinched and shriveled. The juniper looks unfazed, much of it snow covered. The white trunks of the birch soak up the white of the snow and give it off with dazzling clarity. Behind the building to the west, chickadees and finches perch precariously on the larch cones, digging out the seeds. Unbelievably, a small flock of robins has wintered over; I see them occasionally flying between beech and apple.

In the cloister garden, the snow is piled high. A friend raked the snow off the cloister roof, and the only place for it to go was right onto the garden. Even the statues at the four corners of the garden are mostly covered. A few of the roses still poke through the snow mounds, along with some of the tallest perennials. The faded brown stalks are a focal point, a contrast to the endless billows of white.

The gathering room, our all-purpose area that holds refectory, library, and community room, is sheer joy. Here the windows face south and west and flood the room with light and sun all winter long. Our little monastery was only recently built, so we were able to use many recent construction advantages: super insulation, passive solar orientation, and radiant heat in the floor. Though today is bitter outdoors, the brilliant sun keeps the room snug and warm.

This is a gracious space, with a cathedral ceiling, massive beams, clerestory windows, and book-lined walls. My most precious herbs perch on black benches in front of the large south windows, soaking up the sunshine. A huge rosemary, a bay, a lavender, lemon grass, and myrtle all love this space. Two over-wintering parsleys, country cousins of the other elegant herbs, sit dowdily nearby. The sun turns the sword leaves of the lemon grass into translucent, living green. No geraniums got potted up last fall, so there are no flowers. But even without bright color, the green reality of the plants reminds me that winter will pass, and beneath the snow, the earth awaits.

“The changing seasons form the crucible in which we experience time on earth.”<sup>2</sup> So says Baron Wormser, a former Maine poet laureate.

Winter in Maine is truly a crucible: a slow chalice of transformation. One is pushed deep down into oneself by the weight of winter; long, snowy days; long snow-covered months. Bitter, icy cold, with winds whipping right down off the Arctic Circle, or so it feels. In the bitterest of the cold there is usually sunshine—delusional sunshine, bright and splendid, but without the merest whiff of warmth. The cold yields to clouds and milder temperatures, but with the clouds comes snow—often, lots of snow, as in the last storm. Last winter we had interminable snow; it seemed eternal, and the continual gray overcast grew more and more depressing as the winter progressed.

And so I sit in my cell, and gaze out. “Boredom,” I think, “this is boredom.” Yet, I have more than enough to keep me busy. Some task or other

always needs to be done. There's lots of computer and office work. There's cleaning and shoveling and sometimes cooking, and making sure the house runs well. There is the usual routine of prayer, both in community and in solitude. There are the twice-weekly Communion services for the parish. There is fundraising for our longed-for retreat house, and planning for it. There are people to see, and seemingly unending correspondence. There is at the moment a deluge of potential vocation applicants. Most, perhaps all, will never pan out. But all must be attended to, listened to, corresponded with. Some will even visit. One or more, God willing, might even enter.

Seed catalogs have arrived, with their tempting listings and flashy colors. Even flashier e-mail advertisements from two of my favorite suppliers show up. One, from a famous East Coast nursery, sends regular tantalizing ads every Sunday. Today's installment features colorful and tasteful combinations of annuals for summer planters, an inviting show of color in a black and white month. Another, from a much-loved homegrown Maine company, brings a monthly calendar filled with useful and user-friendly garden information.

Normally by late January I have already pondered over what new plants to try, planned the garden, and ordered the seeds. All the usual ones, plus a couple of new ones that intrigue, or that might look good in the garden. Or a new variety of vegetable. Or something extra, "just for fun."

So far I've ordered a few trees and shrubs, set for pickup in late April. But otherwise, nothing. I

look at the seed catalogs, and yawn. Boredom has set in.

Winter is a crucible indeed: a great white bowl holding all the elements for transformation. It is a large kettle, whose sides are the walls of the hermitage and the cold harsh winter that surrounds it. The fire is the pressure of being disconnected from the face of the earth—no brown soil, no green grass, no rich smell of earth. And the lid? Boredom, and the long months of waiting for new life. My only lullaby of spring is a few green herbs on a black bench in the sun.

One of the things I have learned over the years is that the feelings I am experiencing are a good indication of how to find God's voice in my life. They are the living evidence of the word God is speaking to me right here and now. In order to hear God speaking in this way, I need to "listen with the ear of my heart," as the *Rule* tells me. I must be still, pay attention, and ask questions. "Go deeper," I hear. "Go deeper." Go deep, with the earth, with the plants, with the living things. Go deep, be still, and in the stillness, listen. Boredom would have me move away and distract myself. Instead I am called to sit in my cell, be still, and listen.

I read the daily scriptures, praying with them. Today I read the call of Peter and Andrew, James and John. Speaking loud and clear to me is a seemingly peripheral line, "believe in the gospel" (Mk 1:15 NAB). "Believe in the gospel," I repeat, over and over, breathing in and out, "believe in the gospel." Slowly, heart and mind quiet. I remember that *gospel* means "good news." Unutterably good news,

so very good that we find it nearly impossible to even take it in, much less believe it. Believe in the good news.

Amazingly, we have lots of ordinary, everyday good news right now. We are having extra time for prayer and solitude, and we live in a wonderful new hermitage, with minimal maintenance and minimal need for heat and power. This is a stunningly beautiful place, with views to the south and east, protected from the north and west and from the bitter winds of winter. We have solitude and spaciousness, a wonderful group of friends and supporters, and even a candidate who is planning to enter in a few months, and other potential candidates who will soon be visiting. Sure, there are daily difficulties, frustrations, troubles. But there is so much good news right now; why should I be bored?

But in fact, I am, and so God is trying to get my attention with it. Perhaps the boredom is masking something deeper? Perhaps it is the lid I've put on deeper emotions. Perhaps . . . I think back, and remember that a while ago, our new candidate indicated that she would like to enter in late April. Suddenly, after having just two members for a long time, we were faced with a possible third. Suddenly we were faced with the reality of change. Anxiety flared up, real and strong. I pondered it, wondering if it was indicating that she should not enter. No, I finally decided, it wasn't that sort of anxiety. It's the anxiety that comes with the reality of change, commitment, and new life. And then, after I decided that, it seemed to go away.

Today I realize that it hasn't gone away, I've just covered it up. God is reminding me: this anxiety is real. It's not bad and it's not overwhelming, but it is real. "Anxiety is my voice, speaking within you," God is saying. "It's telling you your life will change a bit. But remember, 'believe in the gospel,' and know that I am with you in it." It's a good change, we believe, but any change leads to the unknown. God is leading us to deeper faith, deeper trust. God leads me on my own journey in faith, and leads us together in this little house of God deeper into its God-given mission of faith and prayer. Each time we step out in faith and trust, we have the joy and hope of new life, but we also feel the cool breath of anxiety. If we didn't, we wouldn't be human. Anxiety right now is God's gift, urging caution, yet also proclaiming the imminence of new life.

January is a good time to sit in the cell and learn from it. Boredom would have us move away, into the world of distraction. Boredom would have us dissipate our energies, and turn away from attentiveness to the "one thing necessary." Yet, boredom, like any emotion, need not be acted upon. We can sit with it, pay attention to it, talk to it. Respect boredom, and it will yield to our desire to learn from it.

January is a crucible, and crucibles are all about transformation. That's a big word, yet a hopeful word. Sometimes it can seem an impossible word. The message of the seasons is that change and transformation happens. The message of the Gospel? "Believe in the good news . . . for nothing is impossible to God."