

I haven't done much reading of my work to groups lately and I miss it. I was always amazed how people enjoyed themselves listening to writers and I know I've always had fun reading my stuff to them.

When asked to read from my book, "Monk In The Cellar," I resisted the temptation to simply bring a copy of the novel and jump helter skelter from this chapter to that, confusing my audience and not truly depicting the characters or the story line. I've seen authors do it and felt cheated when the scribbler didn't do his best to tell me why it was so all fired important I should be sitting there listening to him.

So instead, I chose three or four themes, then selected matching excerpts and fashioned each group into what I hoped was an organized presentation of my thoughts. Of course they were sometimes choppy and far ranging, given the task at hand, but I think the efforts were worthy.

I'll run the following presentation this week of the Faith & Tolerance theme to give a taste of Monk to those unfamiliar with the book and blog. Those who know Monk In The Cellar and Brother Jesse will recognize elements of what follows, at times fit together in patterns somewhat different than previously seen.

## Faith & Tolerance

I wanted to read from Monk In The Cellar tonight, specifically the theme on Faith and Tolerance. Although it's fiction, it is somewhat biographical and in it I write often about what I believe.

Well ... "What I believe" is a statement I don't often use, and neither would Jesse at this point in his life. Rather, "What I think about, how I think about it, the construction of what touches me, or makes sense to me, even without explanation."

For background, Monk In The Cellar is a fictional story that began on the Internet as a blog and later became a novel. It's about eleven monks who live in a very run down monastery that used to be a Jewish resort in the Catskills back in the 1920s. I pictured it up the road from Big Pink, the house halfway down the mountain where Bob Dylan came to record with The Band in the 1970's. I lived at the foot of that mountain road near Woodstock from 1977 until moving south in 2011.

Except for electricity and indoor plumbing, the Ardent Brothers have owned the old mansion for almost 90 years but never improved the place. The dilapidated Chapter House is about to fall down, but the land it sits on at the top of the mountain is quite valuable and the monks' superiors back

in Ireland want to kick the monks out and sell it for cash.

By the way, when each monk professes his vows he chooses a patron saint. No one remembers why, but it is the tradition of the order for the spiritual sponsor be female, she now glorified in heaven and evidently able to handle the millions of prayers directed at her. Maybe thousands. Brother Jesse is actually Brother Saint Jessica of Galilee, honoring one of the women who accompanied Mary Magdalene to the tomb on Easter morning. Jesse has a special devotion to Saint Jessica, believing he is the only person on earth who prays to her.

The monks often use male nicknames, calling each other Kickstart or Bouncer or Harpo in their private conversations whispered outside the hearing of the abbot.

Oddly enough, they employ a “cloister” of complete silence only in the daytime, from just after breakfast to ten minutes before supper. The night-time hours would be better for silence, since speech in the daytime is certainly useful when working together on projects. Grunts and sign language are often not up to the task. When Bouncer sets the group of monks to cleaning up the Chapter House, his instructions are often misinterpreted and the results can be hilarious.

## **Jesse writes:**

When I was elected Abbot, a role I certainly did not want, I became the leader of our little band of eleven monks. I’ve been Abbot here for only a few months and I can’t say I like it. Our superiors back in Ireland want to sell the place to pay off their European debts. If they do, I think they will disband us ... kick us out on the road. And even if that never happens, I worry about our lack of food supplies and money. Now more than ever I need faith.

As the abbot, I find myself spending time with one brother or another who might be having what can be called a crisis in faith. I have spent my entire life analyzing the various doctrines of my church and for reasons I don't fully understand the creeds have become far less important to me as I grow older. And I’m afraid I don’t have much patience any more for those who agonize over their doubts. There are some who are in constant turmoil about a) the existence of God, b) God’s plans for the universe, and c) whether He’s going to send them to hell. That’s an awful way to spend one’s time, let alone one’s life. I think we can assume that an entity who so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son could certainly be trusted to have your best interests at heart. Do you think Christ hung on a cross angry over your impure thoughts?

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As I age, I worry less about my soul. I think it will do what it is meant to do. I am more afraid for my heart. By heart, I mean that part of me that feels someone's agony other than my own. It's the only part of me that stands a chance of leaving this world in better condition than when it got here.

The person who may have taught me the most about living a life of faith is Dolly Parton. She told an interviewer (Larry King) who asked if she was a believer that she had decided she was, but didn't feel like it every day. But she could act like it, and base her decisions on it. I could spend years in theology classes and not come up with a better plan for how to live a life of faith. It's not always easy, of course. I'm quite sure everyone who seeks the spiritual life runs into a brick wall now and then. Brother Bilhilda, who we call Bouncer, and who is the mad scientist who fixes our toilets, laughingly says most of us have a deep and abiding faith that ... comes and goes.

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I have been mentoring Brother Saint Winifred of Gwytherin in Denbigshire. Since that would be quite a mouthful when cheering him on in softball game, we just call him Kickstart.

Kick is the youngest of our brothers. He raced motorcycles after getting a degree in Antiquities. Seven years in a library will do that to a man.

I once asked him if he was a Hells Angel and amphetamine distributor, but the 31 year old Brother only laughed at that suggestion. Kick tells me he wasn't given a choice of patron saints and doesn't care much for Saint Winifred, who he says (from what he's read) reminds him of his fifth grade teacher. Instead ... behind her back, I guess ... he prays to Saint Gunda of Sandeck. She was a member of the Polish Royal Family a few hundred years ago. I've never heard of her, and for all I know she is the patron saint of land taxes and public executions. But Kick says she was also known for her patience. Maybe I should pray to her, too.

Kickstart and I took on the project of trying to keep the porch from falling off the front of our Chapter House. We have no materials, but if we let it go any longer, visitors will have to use a step ladder to come in our front door.

I do not at all like outdoor chores after the first frost. It's damned cold out there and my arthritis is bound to flare up, as I told Kickstart. He wasn't listening. He worked in a light jacket while I bundled up in a ratty old down coat.

"Jesse," he said, "I think we're doomed."

"You mean like we're going to be hit by a Protestant comet or find out Fulton Sheen came back from the dead and became Pope?" I asked.

"You know what I mean," he said.

"I do know what you mean, but I have no answer."

"They're going to throw us out. I know it," he said.

I didn't tell Kick, but that's exactly what I worry about.

"Where are you going to live, Jesse?" he asked.

"Maybe I'll apply for assistance or maybe I'll get a job in a store," I said, "and get a room down in the village ... I don't know. After all, I don't have far to go. You have an entire life ahead of you, Kick."

"My life is here on this mountain," he said. "I'm staying."

"Well, you can't," I told him.

"In the woods," he said. "I'll stay in the woods."

I sneered. "A real Desert Father, huh?"

"Jesse," he said, "everything I learned about my life and myself and God is here on this mountain."

"God isn't just on this mountain," I said.

"What I know of him is," said Kick.

I can easily make my experience of God a head trip, purely and conveniently a construction of my mind. I forget that he is *in* his creation, which includes me, my body, my heart, everything and everyone around me and even my desires.. When I long for Grandma's special gravy and biscuits from sixty years ago on a Sunday afternoon, God is in that somehow. I can't tell you how. I only know it to be true after years of trying to meditate on what's in my heart and coming up with chicken and dumplings.

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Even though my creeds were unraveling, I had to have a faith of some kind to become a monk, of course. But we each get to where we're going by a different route. So don't think that during college all I did was study my Bible. I also played in a rock and roll band. Not very well, I might add.

And I'd say I had an ordinary young adulthood. I dated girls, got drunk on occasion and eventually became a contemplative monk. I'm not saying all

my brothers traveled the same route as me. Some of them never came closer to sex than Playboy magazine, that staple of young manhood that taught us what women really looked like with their clothes off. Really.

I lost my intense religiosity halfway through high school and never regained it. To this day I am not religious in that sense, nor are my brothers here at Our Lady of West Saugerties. Neither are we necessarily zealots for any given set of finely constructed beliefs. (Those are the folks we call "Jesuits.") We are simply men who have been chosen by a God with a sense of humor to lead a life of prayer and contemplation. And in doing so we discover our relationship with him ... or her, if you want.

Many people have been given their beliefs. As a Catholic schoolboy, I received my faith as gift with strings attached. I gave it back years ago and now I have to work hard to discover my own faith, His plan for my understanding what he wants from me. It's a job. That's why I call it a vocation.

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Here's my latest heresy.

If God were a short order cook, we'd never be hungry.

If God were an accountant, everyone would get what they deserved.

If God were a doctor, everyone would enjoy excellent health.

If God were a teacher, we'd all be worried about Report Cards. But from what I've seen in the world, not many are worried about their Report Cards.

If God were a policeman everyone would be in a lot of trouble and if God were a judge everyone would be damned.

But God is none of those. He is bigger than the familiar. He's larger than life. So I'm thinking He must be a cowboy. When you consider it, He almost has to be. He's extremely courteous and won't push himself forward unless invited. He's always mending fences. I see Him out on the range under a huge sky full of stars waiting for his doggies to bed down while he sings them to sleep.

And only a cowboy would say, "There, there, little darlin'" when with tears in our eyes we get down on our knees to pray. Or more often to complain

OK, you can laugh at my simple way of thinking about God, but the Truth is I really don't know what God is like to you. And my job in life is to find out what He is to me.

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I have a tendency to be dismissive of anyone's faith that doesn't agree with

my mental conception of God and how he operates. I was brought up with a modern mental approach to what my contemporaries called religion. There were these basic rules of the road concerning God and if your religion or practice didn't agree with them you were a heathen or no better than one. I haven't the slightest idea where I got the authority to be the judge and jury of how the supreme ruler of the universe chose to witness himself to any one individual. It was as if God had to first check with me before revealing himself to my neighbor.

Given my capacity to make mistakes, I can now admit such a balance of powers didn't make any sense. If God had to always wait upon my say-so, the creation of the world would still be a great plan that I'd look into when I found the time on my next three day holiday weekend. Let There Be Light might get done, but not much else. Mountains and oceans and elephants would be still floating around the universe waiting to be attached to something.

But the Truth is God told us a long time ago He wasn't planning on waiting around for us to catch up with Him as He continued to reveal himself. Jesus told Nicodemus. "Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' And then Jesus told him about the Wind. It blows where it chooses. You can't catch it. It catches you.

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You know, I've lived for 35 years up here on the mountain the Indians called Oteora, The Land In The Sky. So it appeared to them as they gazed up from the valley below. Tonight it may still be pleasant down there. But up here on the peak ... in cowboy land ... a white mantle of snow covers the blue-green hemlocks. The moon has risen and the bare maples glisten black in the cold damp air. Clouds scraped by the mountain top from the bottom of the sky drift away like ships leaving without us. Tonight my brothers and I lie shivering on our cots while sleet and snow pelt the windows, and the wind has its way with our creaking old house.

The spirit blows where it chooses and you don't know where it's been or where it's going.

But I know one thing. He is taking care of us as we bed down. And when the wind howls past the eaves and moans down through the holes in the roof, I know that God is singing us to sleep.

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