



To make  
ourselves  
at home



Pathways  
of  
Grace

## Making ourselves at home: Three Reflections

### *Making ourselves at home*

*We must be as religious cherishing a habit of at once jumping into our place and finding ourselves at home in it, just as much at home there as anywhere else. ...The religious life is not to be a dreamy dissatisfaction with the present state of things, it is not to be a mere not knowing what to do next, because things about us are as they are, but it is the consciousness of being able to make ourselves at home under all circumstances and able to turn everything that happens to account. This is what the religious should be — ready; ready but not fussy. Fr. Benson, SSJE*

Richard Benson's Cowley Fathers did a lot of making themselves at home. They began in a time when the idea of Anglican monks and nuns was new and, in many circles, greeted with hostility. They left their England and took charge of parishes in Boston and Philadelphia, served under bishops who didn't want them, and began missions in Africa and India.

They found ways to make themselves at home in all circumstances. That was partly because they were grounded in the way of Eucharist, Daily Office and Reflection. Life had a shape to it, and they lived it wherever they were. The habits of forgiveness and mercy, mutual care, and self-offering were to be lived in all situations. They were not going to stop being who they were.

In these last months, how have you made yourself at home? What inner core of silence have you called upon? What humility has shown itself? What habits and practices have helped you be who you are?

For many it's an unfamiliar idea. It can be both empowering and frightening to hear that you can make yourself at home in all circumstances and turn it to good account. The idea that is up to me to make myself at home is new for many of us. It's a thought that many will never have on their own as they focus on the discomfort of new situations and conditions. But once they have the thought, once the possibility has entered, another step on the journey to new life has been taken.

## *Benedict shaping a community*

Robert had been consulting with WomenRising for several years. The organization faced significant change when an election brought in a new administration with a different approach to funding programs to address poverty. There was a sense of turmoil and disquiet. The management team was angry and disoriented. They feared having to end programs that served women and their families, staff layoffs, and worst of all, the loss of their institutional integrity if they just went along with the new policies.

During the previous few years the management team had worked with Robert as they managed two similar polarities—between change and stability and between adaptation and institutional integrity and identity.

In the new circumstances those two polarities took on a new life.

How could they manage those polarities in the new situation? How were they to make themselves at home in this new, strange, hostile world?

Robert's a Benedictine; a professed member of the Order of the Ascension. Everyone connected to the Order takes the same Promise—"To seek the presence of Jesus Christ in the people, things and circumstances of life through stability, obedience and conversion of life."

He shared with the management team the third part of the triangle. He said something like this: "Most of you know I'm part of a religious tradition. I don't want to press that upon you but there's a way of living within it that may be useful in what we face at WomenRising. When managing the polarity between stability and change, the polarity between adaptation and integrity and identity, the starting point is to listen. It's a kind of obedience to Reality."

So that's what we did. We listened closely to what the new standards of the government were going to be. We listened to one another, to the board, to the entire staff. We gathered together community people from the business and nonprofit sectors of the city. We listened to everybody. And in time the organization found a way to live with integrity in this different world. New programs were established, new staff people hired. Some programs closed. And WomenRising continued to serve women and their families.

Benedict's wisdom is pragmatic and kind. It has guided communities for 1,500 years. It's been adapted to serve many religious traditions and types of organizations. There's no surprise that the behavioral sciences have discovered much the same wisdom in action-research. It has managed to make a home in each age and many societies.

Of course, for the Christian there is more.

*For stability means that I must not run away from where my battles are being fought, that I have to stand still where the real issues have to be faced. Obedience compels me to re-enact in my own life that submission of Christ himself, even though it may lead to suffering and death, and conversatio, openness, means that I must be ready to pick myself up, and start all over again in a pattern of growth which will not end until the day of my final dying. And all the time the journey is based on that Gospel paradox of losing life and finding it...my goal is Christ.*  
Esther de Waal

## *The loneliness of the cross*

Jesus made himself at home on the Cross. It took some doing.

On the Mount of Olives, in the Garden of Gethsemane, he prayed. He wanted the cup to pass from him. He was agitated and in great distress. He threw himself on the ground. “His sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground.” John reports an earlier experience as the time comes near—“Now my soul is troubled.”<sup>1</sup>

Being at home in this set of circumstances had no comfort in it, no hope of survival to offer. Alone at the trial. Alone when mocked and tortured. Alone in his suffering.

The loneliness wasn’t a new experience. For three years the disciples routinely failed to understand who he was and what his life was about. They argued over power. Judas didn’t see him as committed enough to the poor and so betrayed him. Peter denied him. Those closest to him would fall asleep when he was in anguish. And at the cross—not the 5,000, not the 70, nor even the 12—just the Blessed Mother, Mary Magdalene, and John the Evangelist.

Yet on the cross, what do we see? – forgiveness (Luke 23:34), mercy (Luke 23:43), caring for his mother and John (John 19:26-27), praying the ancient psalm (Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34), an acknowledgment of his suffering (John 19:28), at the end he gives up his life and offers himself to the Father. (John 19:30 and Luke 23:46). Even death was not going to stop him from being who he was.

Henri Nouwen says that loneliness will often morph into hostility. How is it that Jesus doesn’t do that? How is it that Jesus makes himself at home in dying and death? Does it come to you how he did that, how in many ways “he set his face to Jerusalem?”<sup>2</sup> How does that play in your own life now?

The tradition is rich with guidance about making ourselves at home with dying and death. Benedict wrote that we are “to keep death before one’s eyes daily.” The collect for the Feast of Jeremy Taylor has us pray, “Make us deeply aware of the shortness and uncertainty of human life.” From Thomas Merton, “The more you try to avoid suffering, the more you suffer, because smaller and more insignificant things begin to torture you, in proportion to your fear of being hurt. The one who does most to avoid suffering is, in the end, the one who suffers most.” And from Esther de Waal, “Another way of expressing this truth would be to see it in terms of a continual dying and rebirth throughout my life. That I cannot have new life without death is the most fundamental and inescapable of all the tensions I have to hold onto.”

And He turned it to good account. Evelyn Underhill saw it. “Having roused the hostility of official religion by His generous freedom of love, he was condemned by a combination of political cowardice and ecclesiastical malice to a barbarous and degrading death; and made of that death the supreme triumph of self-abandoned Charity.”

In *Reaching Out*, Henri Nouwen writes, “It is a sign of spiritual maturity when we can give up our illusionary self-control and stretch out our hands to God. But it would be just another illusion to believe that reaching out to God will free us from pain and suffering.

Often, indeed it will take us where we rather would not go. But we know that without going there we will not find our life.”

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 26:36-46, Luke 22:39-46, John 12:27, John 18:1-11, Mark 14:32-42

<sup>2</sup> Luke 9:51-56