

Monastery Experiences

“Progress from small beginnings. Keep to the Yoga and eat sensibly.

Meditate. Incantate the prayers you learned as a child.”

Anon

In the 1960s, I went for rest and inspiration to a Benedictine Monastery on the Isle of Wight – Quarr Abbey. There I was accommodated in a minimally furnished Guest Houseroom (recently occupied for a lengthy sojourn by singer musician Scott Walker) and ate with the 40 monks in their refectory. The table servers were in full habit, cowled and wore aprons. I sat in the table company of the Abbot and Prior with other guests, among them women considering entering the religious life elsewhere. The meal was taken in silence while a monk read aloud from a sort of minstrel gallery above us. He read a short passage from a spiritual book, then passages from a current political memoir: *The Blast of War* by Harold Macmillan – one time Tory Prime Minister.

After meals, coffee was taken in a room where other monks joined the guests in conversation. Classical music from a hi-fi wafted in the background. I attended the sung Offices in the monastery church: Gregorian chant inspired by the Holy Trinity: God, The Father, Son and Holy Ghost. The sung chants were soaring, heavenly, mystical, inspiring; the profoundly devotional singing of the Salve Regina completing Vespers brought tears.

During the day, I could walk in the monastery grounds and visit the community farm and vegetable and herb gardens.

Three spiritual guides counselled me: Fr Dom Anton Zeigler; Prior Anselm Warrilow; and the guestmaster, Brother John. The first evening they brought a selection of spiritual books to my room. I was not obliged to read them, but they asked me to at least read one, and they would question me about my reading. I chose the life of the English martyr Edmund Campion by Evelyn Waugh. After meals, one of the three holy men would come to my room where we would have a conversation and I made a confession of my sins. Once, after supper, the Abbot asked me to accompany him on a cloister walk. It was very stormy weather. As an ice breaker, I said: “So much for *The Blast of War* –this is the blast of Quarr.” His laughter was thunderous. When it was time to leave, no demand for money was made, but the convention was that guests made an offering. For seven days I gave £25.00.

During the 1970s, once a year, key charity movers and shakers in the London street homeless scene where I worked decamped to The Potteries, Rugelly, near Stoke-on -Trent. There we were joined by similarly occupied colleagues from

all the major UK cities including Belfast and Dublin for a three- day conference, including seminars, group work and relaxation. There was a bar after supper and men and women people sat about mainly on the floor, and smoked and talked late into the night. In those days it was common practice to light up, take a puff and pass your fag around. Sticking to tipped varieties was advisable: the roll ups could contain "herbal" substances.

The most unusual group therapy I attended was a day session conducted by the psychiatrist R. D. Laing in Bromley-by -Bow, London, in a house where Mahatma Gandhi once slept overnight on the floor. Laing was regarded as prominent among the supreme extreme Flower Power, Way Out, New Age Eastern /enlightenment shamanic influencers at the time.

The first hour was 'bare honesty.' He stripped naked, and invited all attending – men and women alike – to do the same. Those who opted to stay dressed (myself included) went to an adjoining room to which the dialogue was relayed. The Holy Trinity invoked there was Sigmund Freud, Alfred Adler and Carl Jung.

About that time I met the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi: the guru the Beatles patronised. Dubbed "The Giggling Guru" by The London Times, he gave an audience to hundreds who shared a sort of Transcendental Yoga with loads of chanting. I was a Council housing officer advising a group of collective squatters threatened with eviction. One of these young women – not Asian, but sari-robed, with beads, bangles, and painted spot on her forehead – got me an entrée. She assured me that the mystic could hover above the ground., but I did not witness that.

The culmination was the 'Obtaining of The Knowledge'. I joined the queue. For the minimum offering of a fiver, I was channelled in a series of graded queues. High-figure donors had priority.

The yogi – still un-elevating – would whisper just one word in my ear, which an acolyte told me to repeat hundreds of times a day and I would achieve enlightenment. The non-payers simply got a general blessing.

I did not hear nor understand what the yogi whispered because someone banged a gong closely above me, but my self-proclaimed 'spiritual sister' told me the word is Love.

Tony Brady