



MY LIFE AS A 21st CENTURY MONASTIC

This is how it happened.

“No one can find God without having first been found by Him. A monk is a man who seeks God because he has been found by God.” — Thomas Merton, from the Prologue of *The Silent Life*, 1957

Nearly 25 years ago, I wrote a book called *Alone With God*. At the time, I was traveling around Central America with a few friends. After two months backpacking around the lush jungles and coastlines of Costa Rica, we made our way across the border to Bocas Del Toro, a lush island archipelago off the eastern coast of Panama. The B&B we found there had outdoor showers, breezy gauze curtains in place of doorways, and actual internet access. That’s where the American publishing house found me.

“We want you to write a devotional book for singles,” they said. “We think you’re the right person to do it. We think you have something to say to all the single Christians out there.”

I didn’t like the idea at all. Not that singles didn’t need or deserve a devotional book of their own. I just didn’t want to be the one to write it. “Singles ministry” was a pretty small box in the Christian world in those days. Once you got pigeonholed inside it, that was pretty much all anyone in Christendom would let you do until you got married and “graduated” on to something more mature. The only thing was, I had serious doubts I would ever get married.

Of course, I never said that. Not to anyone. Not back then. In the protestant world I inhabited in those days, a conversation like that would not have led anywhere good.

Understandably, then, I never wanted my singleness to be the flag I flew as a writer, because once I became known as the “singles writer guy,” I feared it would severely limit what I could write about forever after that.

But, as it turns out, traveling for months across Central America, while truly spectacular and gorgeous, doesn't actually pay well at all. I mean, who knew, right? I was hurting for money, and the book publisher was literally trying to hand me thousands of dollars right there across the interwebs. So, I said yes. I stayed behind in Bocas Del Toro while my friends went on to Honduras. I rented a small cabana that hovered on stilts over the ocean in a quiet north-facing bay. I walked the beach every day, and lit candles every night as the moon rose over the sea. And I wrote the book. I was reading a lot of Oswald Chambers back then, and I loved his work, so I decided to write my book in the style of *My Utmost for His Highest*, as an homage to him and the massive impact his words have had on my life and millions of others.

It's still in print today. I've since revamped it so it's not just for singles anymore. It's for anyone who has a passion for being alone with God. Like I pretty much always do.

I hear a lot these days about the “new monastics.” I'm told it's a full blown movement now, and I really love that it's happening. We're definitely due for it. I think a fresh wave of monastic passion comes with every new era of human history. New eras always usher a lot of uncertainty and tumult into the world, which in turn drives more and more people to get away from the churn and hustle of societal life, to rediscover their own rhythm, their own way of breathing, the natural pace of their own thoughts. Monastics are always a gift to the larger society. It's good to be reminded that the social constructs we humans create to live inside are just that — *constructs*. We make them up. They aren't reality. They aren't chiseled into any kind of divine law. When some of us step away from the pressure of the power games and status markers that society loves to box us inside, we remind the world, as Thoreau affirmed in *Walden*, that there are actually many ways to live a beautiful life. Just because your society declares to you, “You must live like this!” does not mean you actually have to.

So, I chose a different path. I fell in love with Jesus early, and all through my youth I chased after him hard; well, as hard as a bone-headed dingfod of a teenager can. I had great friends, and great mentors. Plus, I had experienced some really awful abuse in my childhood that messed me up pretty bad, so I had a desperate need for healing that drove me to God, too. That was no small part of my spiritual hunger; but, at the bottom of it all, I just loved Jesus, and I wanted to be near him. “The nearness of God is my good,” I used to say to myself all the time, quoting David from the Psalms. I could not imagine living any kind of life that would pull me away from pursuing God.

I remember one night I was out with my buddies. These are such terrific guys, and we're all still friends today. Anyway, we were joking around like we always did, and somebody asked which one of us we all thought would get married first. We all knew the answer immediately. I won't say his name, but he's going to read this, and he knows who he is. (We were 100 percent correct, by the way. Dude could not get married fast enough.) Then we argued who would be second, and third, and so on. Nobody named me until nearly the end. When they finally did, somebody said, “I don't know. Mike might beat us all to it. The quiet ones can sometimes surprise you.”

I guess I did end up surprising them, just not in the way they expected. Or maybe I didn't surprise them at all. Maybe they saw it coming, even if they didn't know how to talk about it back then. I mean, I don't blame them, I didn't know how to talk about it either. All I know is when I got home that night, I said to God, "I can't imagine any relationship with a woman being as awesome as the one I already have with you."

Thus began my life as a monastic, though there was no word for it in the protestant lexicon, and, as I would quickly discover, no acceptable place for it in the protestant church.

Of course, because there was no name or place for it in my protestant world, it took a long time for me to figure out what I actually was.⁽¹⁾ You have to remember, this was the early 80s. Pre-internet days. The world was smaller then, and in my world, the road I was traveling just wasn't traveled. There were missionaries who were single, but they always eventually married and came home. There were youth pastors who were single, but they always eventually married and became lead pastors. There were some parishioners who stayed single all their lives, but never by choice, and they always made sure everyone knew it. Singleness was largely regarded as a kind of unfortunate disease, like an unsightly rash you just have to endure and try not to scratch until it goes away. This negative disposition toward singleness was pervasive back then. It really struck me as strange, because it was so opposite to the way singleness is celebrated in the Bible, especially in the New Testament. I mean, Jesus is single. The Apostle Paul was single. Both of them promoted singleness as the preferred path for the follower of Christ. So why was being single such a mark of shame?

My one consolation was Rich Mullins. Rich was a well-known musician, a creative genius, and a modern day prophet who cut through a lot of the religious nonsense of those days and beckoned people back to simple devotion to Christ. And, he was single. Unapologetically single. Single by choice. He was like a signal fire on the mountain calling me to the heights, a beacon in the night guiding me to safe harbor. I was drawn to him for the genuineness of his devotion, the cutting insight of his words, and because he was living the specific kind of life I aspired to live. His singleness wasn't a mistake. It wasn't a failure. It was needed. And it was good.

In my 20s, lots of singles ministries I knew liked to use the tagline: Seeking God Together ... In This Waiting Season of Your Life.

God, I hated that so much. I wasn't waiting for anything. I was choosing a path. One I still follow now in my 60s with great contentment, and no small amount of joy.

There's a story Jesus told about a guy who finds this exquisite pearl of immeasurable value buried in a field.⁽²⁾ Its stunning beauty was so overwhelming that he sold everything he had and purchased the field. I imagine a lot of the people who watched the guy do this thought he was nuts. I mean, why would you sell everything you have just to buy an empty lot? His friends probably pressed him with a list of reasonable concerns: How will you live on this empty plot of land? How will you build a house on it now that you have drained all your accounts? How will you make money off of it? How can you raise a family here? This is a bad investment, man. You need to sell it, even if it's at a loss. This is unsustainable.

(1) This one line could be expanded into an entire post all its own, and I might do that sometime. There were many years of dating, several serious relationships, and a few near-engagements, all in my attempt to "conform" to the path I thought I was supposed to follow. But even as confused as my heart was back then, it just wouldn't let me pull the trigger on marriage. Crossing that threshold felt like a betrayal of everything my soul really wanted. I couldn't do it, even when that meant hurting people I cared deeply about, or being judged and ostracized by my faith community, which, sadly, happened more than once.

(2) Taken from Matthew 13:44-46. I ended up merging the two stories here without realizing it. My apologies to the Author. :) Thankfully, I love the way the truths they convey still hold up so beautifully.

I've had a lot of encounters with people along my path who have viewed my monastic choices with the same fervent concern. "But what about the loneliness?" they say, "and the isolation? It isn't good for you to be alone like that." Or, "What about intimacy? Don't you want that?" Or, if they're a bit more gentle about it: "But you'd make such a good husband!" or "You'd be such a good dad." Sometimes I can hear the genuine distress in their voices. "But there's this pearl," I want to say. But I don't know how to explain it.

I used to wonder why the guy in the story didn't just dig the pearl up and buy it instead. But now I understand that it doesn't work like that. For one thing, the pearl is not something you can buy. It's only something you can give yourself to, and that's only if you're lucky enough to find it. That's the second thing. Because of its incredible value, the pearl is always hidden. The only way anybody ever finds it is by seeking it with all their heart.

Admittedly, in the beginning, my own seeking was nothing but pure desperation. The abuse I experienced as a boy was like an atomic bomb detonating at ground zero in the center of my soul. I was a shell and a shadow of what I was meant to be after that. Even as a kid, I saw in God the only lifeline I had that might somehow be able to cobble me back together into something that at least approximated a human person.

There's another story in the Bible about a woman who was bleeding all the time and could never make it stop (Mark 5:25-34). In that culture that made her "unclean," which meant she was untouchable, and by law had to call out to people all the time, "Unclean! Unclean!" so they knew not to approach her lest they be ritually defiled by her and have to purify themselves too. I could relate a lot to her. I understood what it felt like to be horribly marred in a way that people couldn't readily see. Whenever I got close to people, "Unclean! Unclean!" was constantly sounding off in my head like a siren, warning them away, or maybe warning me I was about to get abused again. I could never tell the difference.

In the story, the woman chased hard after Jesus, pushing through a crowd to get to him. Against all the odds, she got to him, and she got her healing. I thought maybe, if I pushed hard enough, I could get mine too.

So I chased after him. But somewhere in my desperate pursuit, I saw more than just God's capacity to heal. I saw his face. I saw his eyes looking into my eyes. I saw the pearl of great price. And I fell in love.

And, in that very same breath, I fell very much out of love with the idea of following the ways of the world.

It's all those social constructs, you know, that caused the trouble. It's like I could suddenly see that none of them are real. Money is a fiction, a make-believe thing we all agree to care about, so much so we'll work ourselves to death to get our hands on it, or even kill people for it. Gaining social status, achieving power over others — those are the real games that drive us. But they're still just games; humans comparing themselves to other humans, like a bunch of ants obsessively fighting over a tiny mound of dirt. Meanwhile, the vastness of the universe soars in its mystery and wonder over our heads and most days we barely give it a second glance.

Doesn't that seem nuts to you? It sure does to me.

Jesus's teachings and example represented to me an alternative to that crazy. A different way to live, where "the first shall be last and the last shall be first." The "Upside Down Kingdom," as Donald B. Kraybill named it in his great book by that title. Jesus taught that love was the real power, not wealth, or fame, or political might. He said that making yourself little was the path to true greatness, that giving was better than getting, and that laying your life down for the sake of love was the only way to find the life your heart actually desires.

All of that made sense to me. I wanted that life. I wanted God to show me the way.

Though I've never taken any formal monastic vows, I have lived the past forty years of my life as a solitary. I have never been married, or engaged. I have no children of my own. I have always done my best to follow the path carved out for me by God. That path has taken many forms over the decades. I've lived in solitude and in community. I've traveled extensively through many countries, and stayed in one place for years at a time. I've served in multiple faith communities in multiple roles. I've worked professionally as a writer and a coach, and still use these passions to the best of my ability to help people, teams and organizations become all they're meant to be. I guess you could say I have a heart for those who have trouble finding their true voice and their place in the world. Go figure.

I suppose one of the most fascinating aspects of my life as 21st Century monastic is the unique perspective it allows me to have on this shared experiment we call "society." Being a solitary means I live a step or two removed from the hustle and flow of everyday cultural pressures: the way tribal identities make us feel safe but also make us less intelligent, the way status markers drive so much of our behavior without our ever realizing it, the way culture wars are really just tribal wars and rarely have anything to do with right and wrong, the way fear and outrage spread through the population like runaway viruses, infecting otherwise intelligent people without their ever noticing their capacity to reason has been compromised.

Don't get me wrong; I'm not completely immune to these forces myself. I'm in community too; in fact, I consider myself richer in friendship than just about anyone I know. But I'm definitely not on the inside either. I guess you could say I live on the fringe. I'm on the outskirts of culture, in the boondocks of the hip and the cool, and whatever happens to be trending on social media this week.

My unique seat in the arena affords me the privilege of witnessing our collective story unfold in a way not many people get to see. Maybe, sometimes, it might even give me an insight or two that might be helpful to the rest of us. I hope so. Regardless, I find my view from the edge both captivantly beautiful and, far too often, heartbreaking to watch.

So I guess you could say I'm an O.G. monastic. I was a monastic way before being a monastic was considered cool, or even socially acceptable. Mind you, our Catholic brothers and sisters are way more O.G. than all of us protestants on this account. They saw the awesomeness of monasticism right from the start. In fact, if I had been born Catholic, I'd probably be a Jesuit now. The Jesuits are the absolute coolest monastics in my book. Though they aren't technically monastics; they're mendicants. But that's another story.

To be honest, most protestants still haven't bought into the idea of monasticism as a viable spiritual path. They still hold marriage, and especially family, as the ideal endgame for Christian devotion. But the rest of western society has moved on from that. Especially the "nones." If the new monasticism belongs to anyone, it belongs to them. They are embracing a new spirituality, adapting ancient rituals of simplicity, of presence, of contemplative practice, and weaving them into a postmodern life. And they're doing it in droves. May their tribe increase. Their honest seeking is refreshing and much needed in these times. May they find the pearl they seek, and sell everything they have to buy the field in which they find it.

It is a way less traveled, but brimming over with intimacy, adventure and beauty that will not be found in the hustling frenzy of titles, labels and status that society so adamantly demands.

I cannot recommend it highly enough.