

Within My Reach

This, then, is the beginning of my advice: make prayer the first step in anything worthwhile that you attempt. Persevere and do not weaken in that prayer. Pray with confidence, because God, in his love and forgiveness, has counted us as his own sons and daughters.

(PROLOGUE, ST. BENEDICT'S RULE)

You are here, within my reach.
All I need is to open my hands,
accept your gift to me of breath,
turn my awareness your way,
and I find you waiting for me,
patiently, closely.

I don't need to hide myself from you,
who made me in mercy
and know me completely.

When I go to you in prayer, anxiety
turns gradually to serenity.
You smooth my fear with a steady hand
until it subsides,
and I am simplified.

Freed of worry, unhindered by my history,
I need not ask for your favor,
but only for the faithfulness
to take you at your Word,
imbued by holy, emboldening Spirit.
Source of my confidence,

Purpose in my perseverance,
accept this prayer in the name of Christ,
my beginning,
my fulfillment.

I, Too, Belong

For a rule of life they have only the satisfaction of their own desires. Any precept they think up for themselves and then decide to adopt they do not hesitate to call holy. Anything they dislike they consider inadmissible.

(CHAPTER 1, ST. BENEDICT'S RULE)

Gathering God,
you fashioned me
not for isolation, but community.
As much as any member of your body,
I, too, belong
to the people you summon,
the disciples you instruct.

When I submit my shifting mind
to your wisdom, and commit my hands to your work,
my being, brimming with undirected energy,
becomes a purposeful blessing.
Yet I resist you, pursue my private wants,
squander sacred liberty on frivolities.
Time is a grace I too often waste, casually
withholding kindness, inventing excuses

to justify pointless rebellions.
For fear of becoming someone
not of my own invention, I struggle
to fend off my redemption.

Transgress my toughened skin
and loosen with your love
the arrogant knots of my self.
Transform my defiance into reliance
on you. Let me experience as true
what, deep down, I always knew:
to surrender independence
is freedom. To serve other people
is to be made whole in you.

Honor Each Soul

*They should not select for special treatment any individual
in the monastery. They should not love one more than
another unless it is for good observance of the Rule and
obedience.*

(CHAPTER 2, ST. BENEDICT'S RULE)

You prodigal, indiscriminate lover.
You came to us in Jesus,
who gave himself equally to people
who called each other enemies.
Claiming no favorites, cherishing all,
Jesus looked into the eyes
and laid his hands on anyone

deformed by disease and deemed unclean.
Yet he also embraced the priests
who barred these “impure” from the temple.
He dined with the priests’ own oppressors—
the Roman occupiers
and their mercenary tax collectors.

Jesus lived a recklessly welcoming gospel
that unshackled all who could hear it
and struck fear in others whose stature would suffer
were they to practice the justice he preached.

Where do I stand in an economy of grace
that venerates no dignitaries,
denigrates no “poor slobs”?
I want to be chosen, distinguished, upheld.
I want to choose whom to invite and whom
to leave off the guest list, exclude from the table.

Still, inside me another, deeper urge persists:
the hunger of a purged, non-partisan spirit
capable of love without conditions.
It’s your Spirit in me,
your Word in my body, teaching me
to honor each soul you lead into my life,
to see in each face, beautiful or ugly,
the features of the living Christ.

To Listen In Concert

To get the balance right it should be remembered that, whereas it is right for subordinates to obey their superior, it is just as important for the superior to be far-sighted and fair in administration. (CHAPTER 3, ST. BENEDICT'S RULE)

I live in a land of self-styled mavericks,
a society that venerates soloists
and emulates lonesome heroes.

Your way leads out of isolation,
multiplies me and me
into us.

You call your people
to put our heads and hearts together,
to listen in concert, consult one another
before we decide.

It would be more efficient to trust
my own instincts solely,
to horde responsibility, act unilaterally,
and sweep up the credit when it came—
so says the chatter of an only-childish brain.

You call into my awareness a world
wider than my single mind. When you speak to me
through a multiplicity of human voices,
you unsettle in me the idol of certainty
and alter my priorities.

You reach through my prayers
into my personality
to remind me you are Trinity,

the holy plural unity,
three ways of being wholly divine.

The company of the faithful welcomes me
not to demand my own way, but to coexist
with other women and men, and practice
the discipline of listening to them.

Your Paradoxical Gospel

Your hope of fulfillment should be centered in God alone.

(CHAPTER 4, ST. BENEDICT'S RULE)

Sacred Encircler, I'm far less ready
to surrender my independence
than you are to surround me with your love.

I dodge your embrace.
I busy myself, chase down achievements,
then trip on some humbling truth and stumble
into your paradoxical gospel,
a story so old, so told, I'm startled
when it confronts me with the falsity
of my frenetic efforts,
the reality of your greater mercy.
You don't hand me glory. You ask me
to empty my hands of my burdens,
my mind of my plans.

You command me to love you entirely, and others
as though they lived in my skin.
In my fear that I'll disappear
if I give in to you, I fall to the depths
of my unbelief. This inward poverty
comes with a challenge:
to give up my pretense of self-sufficiency—
or to persist in it,
and see where it gets me.

Ready Me to Respond

*With a ready step inspired by obedience they respond by
their action to the voice that summons them.*

(CHAPTER 5, ST. BENEDICT'S RULE)

In the beginning, you sighed.
You spoke over chaos and made the original day.
This day shines as that one must have done,
the sky a bright arc,
the earth a dark dynamic,
everywhere, beings you articulate in love.
When you speak, life pulses in my limbs.
I run with wild energy you breathe into me.

Your second word comes: a summons,
curbing the frenzy, guiding my feet.
Open the ear of my heart today.
Encourage me to do a harder thing

than mere hearing;
ready me to respond.

I'm fond of my internal monologue,
the sound of my mental soliloquy,
relevant to no one but me.

Obedience. The very word fences me in.
I chafe at the thought, and then—
find myself shaken awake
by some act of uncommon decency
or outrageous violation
that shouts me out of my self-
preoccupation and back
to the land of the living:

here, where you breathe
and name everything,
where my heart's ear bends
and my life depends
first on obedient listening.

No Objection

. . . the disciple's role is to be silent and listen.

(CHAPTER 6, ST. BENEDICT'S RULE)

Jesus, when you lived among us,
traveling,
teaching on lakesides,
people thronged and clamored, eager
for the healing you had power to impart
with a word.

With your cures came commandments:
*love God so fiercely
you'll love one another
as though there's no barrier
between another's suffering and your own.*

I see myself on an ancient beach,
wave-tumbled rocks hard beneath my feet.
An argument sits on my tongue,
a bred-in-the-bone sense of self-preservation.

Yet for some reason, I raise
no objection to you and your foolish,
self-sacrificial compassion. I look
across the water's cold, complicated surface,
raise only a hand,
and skip a flat stone.

The Humbling Rungs

. . . our proud attempts at upward climbing really will bring us down, whereas to step downwards in humility is the way to lift our spirit up towards God.

(CHAPTER 7, ST. BENEDICT'S RULE)

From the level plain of my human-sized life,
I lift up to you my weary eyes.
I kneel amid the clutter of dashed aspirations—
inflated hopes that fell flat, upheld as they'd been
only by an air of importance,
not by the humbling rungs of true prayer.

I tried to fly on my own power. I dreamed
of the praise I would reap, the respect, the rewards.
I strove for nothing
but my culture's highest goal,
and for a moment I saw it—success, glinting gold. I flew
like a self-made god toward that sun
until my weak wings melted away,
and I plunged
to the planet I inhabit
with all the other small creatures,
the ordinary mortals who reach, as I do, for you.

Here on earth, the ground is steady underfoot,
and heaven hangs higher overhead than the sun.
Now, to bring you my bruised gratitude and petitions,
my prayers descend a ladder of confession, one-by-one.

Mystery Overcomes Me

The first step of humility is to cherish at all times the sense of awe with which we should turn to God. It should drive forgetfulness away; it should keep our minds alive to all God's commandments. (CHAPTER 7, ST. BENEDICT'S RULE)

Like health, I take you for granted.
Or like a pill to be swallowed, an antibiotic
after the symptoms of illness have gone,
I forget you until late in the day,
when my work is done.

The sun dissolves, calls it a night,
and the understudy moon goes bright.
I think I ought to stargaze,
walk to the end of the driveway
and cast my eyes skyward
to cultivate some semblance of awe.
But I'm beat, so I snap out the light.

And then the darkness,
the effortless darkness
reveals its dark secrets to me.
Mystery overcomes me,
awes me to sleep.

All My Dear Falsehoods

The second step of humility is not to love having our own way nor to delight in our own desires.

(CHAPTER 7, ST. BENEDICT'S RULE)

*I am the road that will guide you to God.
I unravel lies that seduced you.
I am the life you still try to elude.
When you abandon me,
I wait for you. When you return,
I embrace you.*

Some days I prefer
to ignore your assurances,
pave my own path, lose my own way,
cross quicksand if I have to—
anything but
relinquish my will.

Remember the blistering, narcissistic desert,
the devil who taunted you there?
You know it well—the desire, the drive
to conceive and control, predict and prevail.
You, too, have wrestled the egoistic impulse,
the credit-hoarding greed of spirit
that flares within and keeps me,
on some days, from offering praise,
stops me from seeking your face
or following your excellent way.

I'm left to my echoing solitude,
murmuring my own name.

Jesus, teach me to pray. Lend me your hand.
Talk to me of forgiveness until
all my dear falsehoods fall away.
Mend the cracked compass of my mind,
and guide me to my true desire.

At the Feet of Teachers

The third step of humility is to submit oneself out of love of God to whatever obedience under a superior may require of us.

(CHAPTER 7, ST. BENEDICT'S RULE)

Thank you for the ones who nurtured me
when I could only crawl,
who fell to their knees to see from my small perspective,
and upheld me when I took my first, faltering steps.
They helped me walk, however unsteadily,
in the way you had laid out for me.
When I veered toward danger, they forbade me to go any
further.

For my good, early guardians and trustworthy teachers,
who insisted I obey them when my preference for
transgression
would have put me at risk, I thank you, at last.

It took me decades to appreciate the limits they set, to
understand
I'd been hemmed in, behind and before,
not by arbitrary prohibitions, but by your love.

The finest preachers do little more than remind us:
the teachings of Moses and Jesus
mandate reverence, self-control, and kindness.
For exacting instructors who embody compassion
without condescension, confidence without arrogance,
who teach me my neighbors are everyone without exception
and expect me to serve them
not as whimsical option
but as sacred obligation, I thank you.

Help me, O God, to outgrow
any remnant of defiant adolescence within me.
Show me the difference between sullen docility
and discerning obedience. Open my conscience
to prophets who speak on behalf of the silenced
and issue ultimatums grounded in your covenants.
Sit me down at the feet of teachers
who will school me in humility.

The Crux

The fourth step of humility is to . . . readily [accept] in patient and silent endurance . . . any hard and demanding thing that may come our way in the course of . . . obedience, even if they include harsh impositions which are unjust.

(CHAPTER 7, ST. BENEDICT'S RULE)

Late in his truncated life, a modern martyr said,
unearned suffering must somehow be redemptive.
At the crux of the cross, injustice meets up with endurance,
brutality with silence, violence with patience.
As long as the crucifixions continue,
and harsh impositions are borne in obedience;
until all the crosses have been dismantled
and bridges are built with their beams,
you will reclaim the lives of all who die on them
and all who don't: the masterminds,
the engineers and carpenters.

While armed peacekeepers
fight to eliminate tyrants by force,
you redeem, by death-defying grace,
even dictators who scoff in your face.
In the wild illogic of the cross,
death intersects with your tenderness
and you bring forth life irresistible: resurrection
of the least, and of the least forgivable.

The Listener I Need

The fifth step of humility is that we should not cover up but humbly confess to our superior or spiritual guide whatever evil thoughts come into our minds and the evil deeds we have done in secret.

(CHAPTER 7, ST. BENEDICT'S RULE)

Take my mistakes. Take my half-
acknowledged manipulations,
the lies I tell, the honesty withheld.
Take the little fortress I've built around myself
and break it down. My heart has gone
unheard for too long; my life
is overgrown, unwieldy. I can't—
I never could—contain it alone.

Lead me to the listener I need,
a confessor unafraid to look at me
with clear and unaverted eyes.
Send me a soul-friend, someone
kind enough to extend to me
your warm, accepting arms,
and wise enough to understand
truths in me I scarcely recognize.

Closer to Real

The sixth step of humility . . . is to accept without complaint really wretched and inadequate conditions so that when faced with a task of any kind they would think of themselves as poor workers. . . .

(CHAPTER 7, ST. BENEDICT'S RULE)

Miryam was perhaps fifteen
when her uterus, firm and untried,
conceived you. Barley flatbread
enriched her blood and fed you
until the light-hungry world received you.
We know nothing of your mother's labor,
but labor, we do know, is hard.

Did a stonemason's calloused hands
wipe blood from your small, startled face?
Did he smooth sweat from Miryam's forehead,
or hold himself at arm's length, keeping
the cleanliness codes you would grow up
to break? Whatever the forgotten details
of your remarkably human emergence,
surely it was all demanding and delicate,
worrisome work, welcoming you—
a needy, naked infant—
keeping you warm and alive.

When I pity myself
for my own laborious efforts, remind me
to summon the scene of your birth.
Not the crèche of sentimental devotion,

but something closer to real: the pressure
of late pregnancy and long travel, the prospect
of burdensome taxes,
the scent of manure and fear; and then—
the restless work of breastfeeding
under a black sky, huge and unanswering,
an easterly star alarmingly near.

This Litany Forever

The seventh step of humility is that we should be ready to speak of ourselves as of less importance and less worthy than others, not as a mere phrase but we should really believe it in our hearts. Thus in a spirit of humility we make the psalmist's words our own: I am no more than a worm with no claim to be a human person for I am despised by others and cast out by my own people.

(CHAPTER 7, ST. BENEDICT'S RULE)

If the earth had turned
against me;
if gunfire had always
accompanied birdsong;
if I had survived
on what stale bread I could steal;
if my sister had not been so lucky;
if I had watched her life
drain away like sewage;
if violence had dwelt among us

like some traumatized uncle;
if I had grown up confronted by the brute
mechanisms of automatic weapons
at checkpoints on the road to my home,
or had stayed barricaded in our ancient,
occupied neighborhood, growing
familiar with blood's sticky texture;
if I could add to this litany forever
and never tell one untrue tale, then—
I would know what it is
to be considered no more
than a worm.

I would be capable of both:
deep evil, great faith.
You would gaze on me,
whisper, *my beloved*, and in secret,
you would break my chains.
I would walk
through our ruined city,
ready to die if I had to, your hand
strong and easy in mine.

To Honor These Elders

The eighth step of humility teaches us to do nothing which goes beyond what is approved and encouraged by the common rule of the monastery and the example of our seniors.

(CHAPTER 7, ST. BENEDICT'S RULE)

The image in my morning mirror
looks older than I remember. Clearly,
I've outlived my youth: the truth
of my age winks back at me.
Since when have fine lines,
the cartography of time, etched my face?
I can trace a history of smiles
from the corners of my eyes, and of worries,
preserved between my brows.

If it weren't for these creases,
who would I be? A perpetual innocent,
unmarked by history?

Embolden me, Ancient One,
not to squint-away the years,
nor to fear the shortening of the future.
Let me look into the complicated faces
of the old, and recognize enduring grace.
Inspire me to honor these elders
whose long lives are made
mostly of memory, for whom a new day
blooms, unexpected, a blessing.
When I take time for granted,
remind me I'll eventually return