

A Good Life
Benedict's Guide to Everyday Joy
by Robert Benson

Chapter 1: Longing

Seeking his workers in a multitude of people, the Lord calls out and lifts his voice again: Is there anyone here who yearns for life and desires to see good days?

Let us open our eyes to the light that comes from God, and our ears to the voice from heaven that every day calls out this charge: If you hear his voice today, do not harden your hearts.

We must, then, prepare our hearts and bodies for the battle of holy obedience to his instructions. What is not possible to us by nature, let us ask the Lord to supply by the help of his grace.

We intend to establish a school for the Lord's service. In drawing up its regulations, we hope to set down nothing harsh, nothing burdensome. The good of all concerned, however, may prompt us to a little strictness in order to amend faults and to safeguard love.

Do not be daunted immediately by fear and run away from the road. It is bound to be narrow at the outset. But as we progress in this way of life and in faith, we shall run on the path of God's commandments, our hearts overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love.

Listen carefully to these instructions, and attend to them with the ear of your heart. It is advice from one who loves you; welcome it, and faithfully put it into practice.

-- From the Rule of Saint Benedict

Over the past eight or ten years, a number of people have been kind enough and curious enough and gracious enough to allow me to be a leader at retreats for some portion of their community or for some group that they gather together.

There is always this rather odd conversation somewhere in the months before the retreat, a conversation that is held between me and the person who is issuing the invitation.

“What will you teach?” they say.

“I am not a teacher, really,” I say, hoping they are not too disappointed. “I am a pilgrim, and sort of a head cheerleader at such things.”

“Well, then, what are you going to talk about?” they ask.

“We are going to talk some about the Rule of Saint Benedict, an ancient monastic rule, as a way of beginning to see our own lives more clearly. And we are going to look at the ways that we balance our prayer and our work and our rest and our relationships.”

“What should I tell people that we are going to do?” they will say.

“Tell them that we are going to pray the daily office together, and we are going to be silent a good deal. We are going to ask and answer some hard questions, questions that involve really listening to our lives, questions about where our time and energy really go, questions about the things we long for and the things we love. In the end we are going to make a Rule for living our lives based on the wisdom of Saint Benedict’s Rule.”

“Oh,” they say.

I can almost hear them wondering on the other end of the line: What exactly is a Rule anyway? And who is Benedict, and what does the life of a monk have to do with mine, since I am not one and do not believe that I am called to be one.

“It is going to be okay,” I tell them. “You are not coming to listen to me anyway. People go on retreat to listen to God. We are going to make room for that to happen.”

Is there anyone here who yearns for life and desires to see good days?

Whenever I read that question in the preface to Saint Benedict’s Rule, it never fails to make my heart jump a little. I even raise my hand sometimes, or at least I do in my mind. I believe that I am not the only one who feels inclined to raise a hand in response.

I am in search of good days, but no more or less than you and the person standing next to you are. I am also in search of enough good days to make a life, maybe even a good life.

“We live our lives in search,” wrote Frederick Buechner once. We search, he wrote, “for a self to be, for other selves to love, and for work to do.” These are not new things that we moderns are searching for; they are as old as the hills.

The struggle to find others with whom we can share our lives, others who give our lives texture and color and meaning, has been going on forever. The task of finding work to do that is fulfilling and productive and sufficient for our needs has been constant. The need for rest and sustenance and time apart has been never-ending. Our hope and our yearning and our desire for God, and a life lived with God, have been everlasting, from age to age.

The world is not a simple place. It never really was. But it is clear that with the noise and the pace and the demands of life in the information age--if that is still the name for the age in which we are living--the struggle to balance all of those things becomes more and more difficult, and more and more necessary.

We are asked by the communities of which we are a part--our families, our neighborhoods, our churches, and all the rest--to do more, not less. In the places where we work, we are asked to be more productive, more efficient, to work longer and harder. We are seldom encouraged to rest and we are seldom asked to slow down.

We are bombarded by information and by noise, and we are conflicted by our priorities and our choices and our time constraints. We are given lots of power tools--faxes and computers and telephones and automobiles--and yet we still have only the one mind and the one heart and the one spirit. We have only a certain amount of strength and a finite number of hours in the day and these two hands.

How then to wrestle with all of these things, how then to wrestle our way into a life of good days that will yield up some sense of the life for which we yearn? How then to balance all of these competing voices and demands and tensions--some of them good, some of them not so good, and some of them simply omnipresent--with our longing to be with God?

In a world that keeps asking us to go higher and faster, how do we begin to go deeper, into the place where God lives and moves and has his being within us?

In order to begin to see your life as a whole, you must first take it apart. That is what we try to begin to do at the retreats.

The days of the retreats are shaped by the rhythm of daily prayers and set times for meals and silence and rest. In between, during the hours set aside for working, we do the work of writing down as clearly and simply as we can the way we actually

spend our lives. And we begin to compare those notes with the way we want to live out our callings and be with our communities and offer our prayer.

The first thing that we do is to divide our lives into four pieces--prayer, rest, community, and work. Now I know how hard it is to do that arbitrarily.

Where do I put the people that I work with and where do I put my church stuff? Where does the family vacation go, and is a retreat a prayer thing or a rest thing? If I wash the dishes every night, is that work or is it community?

People in the retreat are drawing these little charts and asking where to put stuff, and I try to be as unhelpful as I can, as kindly as I can, of course. It helps not to be a scholar or a teacher at this point, because then I can more easily say that I do not know where those things go on your charts. What I do know is that you have to take all of them into account. What I am sure of is this: All of the bits and pieces of our lives, large and small, must be held up in the light of our longing to live for and with God.

After the charts, we begin to wrestle with another set of questions: Name the things that you do each day, each week, each month, each year that you consider to be prayer. How long does each of those things take and how faithful to them are you? How faithful are you in reality (as opposed to how faithful to them that you want to be or promised to be)?

The questions keep coming: What is your current experience of those things? Are they dry and lifeless to you or are they rich and deepening to you? Why do you do them and should you continue them? Are they habits of the heart for you still or are they simply habits?

Which of them would you keep and why? Which ones would you set aside or reshape in some way or another? Are there practices for prayer that you have heard of or read about or even tried a few times that you would like to add to your own life of prayer? What would it take in terms of time and resources to be able to make those changes or add those practices?

We sort through the same questions about our habits for rest and for community and for work. It is a simple sort of process, but not necessarily an easy one.

‘The Lord waits for us daily to translate his teachings into action,’ wrote Saint Benedict in his Rule.

‘How we spend our day is, of course,’ writes Annie Dillard, ‘how we spend our lives. What we do with this hour, and that one, is what we are doing. A schedule

defends us from chaos and whim. It is a net for catching days.”

“Your way of acting should be different from the world’s way,” Benedict wrote. “The love of Christ must come before all else.” And something in my heart says yes. But very often my life, something, or a whole host of somethings, says something else altogether.

So here I stand, with one foot in the past, and one foot in the present, headed toward a future that is only going to get faster even as some of us get slower. I am perched somewhere between the old-fashioned and the newfangled. And I am not alone in that, either.

So I have taken up traveling in the company of a sixth-century monk named Benedict. He is remembered because of the rule that he wrote for the monks of Monte Cassino. “It is called a rule,” Benedict wrote, “because it regulates the lives of those who obey it.” It has come to be the most influential rule of all for the Christian monastic world.

Which begs the question, of course: What does it have to do with the lives of those of us who live in the twenty-first century who are not monks and are not even planning to be?

I have come to see this “little rule for beginners,” as Benedict called it himself, as almost three different little books.

In the first place, it is a detailed guidebook for running a monastery. It proscribes the details of accepting newcomers, when and where people are to sleep, when the meals will be taken and under what circumstances. It describes the roles of certain persons of authority within the monastery and what their jobs are and how they are to relate to the others. It sets out the rules and practices for everything from receiving mail and visitors, to taking care of the sick and the used clothing, to the times and the disciplines for saying the prayers that are at the heart of monastic life.

This first “book,” if you will, has been the starting point for various and sundry monastic orders throughout the world over hundreds of years. In our time, a visit to any Benedictine monastery in the world will reveal a striking parallel between the shape of contemporary monastic life and the life of those first monks under Benedict’s care. It has, no doubt, been transposed here and there to account for the monastic life in a modern age, but it is still read through and discussed and wrestled with by those who are called to live the monastic life.

This second way of reading Benedict’s Rule is to read it and study it as a spiritual

guidebook, a book that speaks very plainly about the life of the spirit.

Benedict writes very directly about prayer and its fruits and its practice. He speaks clearly about obedience and humility and service and discipline. He talks of devotion and of self-giving, of confession and of compassion, of the longing for God and the realities of living.

The third “book” is Benedict’s call to his monks to live out the gospel in everything that they do. That is the book that catches my attention. For even though I am not called to live the life of a monk, I am called to live a life that becomes the gospel. I too am called to pray without ceasing. I too long to be the sort of person who brings honor and glory to the kingdom by the way that I live my life.

And I am not alone in these desires, either.

I actually did think I was going to be a monk once.

In the late 1980s, I was accepted into and began to attend the Academy for Spiritual Formation. It is a two-year program that involved my going away to a retreat setting with a small community of sixty people, four times a year for a week at a time. Each day we prayed the liturgy of the hours, set specific times for silence and instruction and reflection, shared meals while listening in silence to holy reading, and met in small groups to process the day’s teaching and experiences in particular and the inner life in general.

Though I did not know it at the time that I began the Academy, the daily rhythm of the program was based, in part, on retreat experiences within Benedictine monasteries. I was immediately aware, however, that something deep within me was responding to it. It was a case of the longing of my heart encountering a structure that nurtured and fulfilled that longing at the same time.

In the course of the two years, as various teachers and priests and other learned folks came to teach us about the history and practice of Christian contemplative prayer, one began to read and to fall under the influence of some of the great figures of the inner life. Saint Benedict’s Rule eventually turned up, and when I read it, there was such a clear connection between Benedict’s words and the longing of my heart that I was sure that the only way to respond was to become a monk. (At least, I was sure for a little while.)

Over time, I realized that I was not called to live in the monastery, but I learned that I could live the monastic life interiorly. I began to realize that there were deep truths in Benedict’s Rule that were still as meaningful, and as applicable, for me as they were for those who do live in a monastery.

The more that I read the Rule--and one can read it over often, given its short length--the more I saw that the Rule of Saint Benedict held within it a way of learning to balance the areas of my life so that I might actually become a person of prayer. I began to see--in between the lines about how to elect an abbot and how many letters a monk was allowed to receive and what time monks were supposed to go to prayers in the summer--a way of seeing my life as a whole. I began to see that one might construct a way of living that no longer separated one's spiritual life from the rest of one's life.

The more that I studied and talked and asked questions about the Rule of Benedict, the more I found that there were other lay people in the world who had found such truths as well.

The first such person I met through the pages of a book was a Memphis lawyer named John McQuiston. He wrote a modified Benedictine Rule of his own in a book called *Always We Begin Again*. Then a friend gave me a copy of *Living with Contradiction*, a delightful set of meditations on the Rule by a Welsh Anglican named Esther de Waal. Later I wandered into a copy of *Elizabeth Canham's Heart Whispers: Benedictine Wisdom for Today*. These are not the only such friends that I have found, or the last (I hope), but they are among those who are the most gracious and graceful on their pages.

The notion of living by a rule of some sort is not an easy one for us twenty-first-century Westerners to accept. We are generally too independent, too strong-willed, too mobile to be very interested at all in the idea of something that controls and shapes the way that we live out the days of our lives. We see ourselves as captains of our own ships, masters of our own fates, and we are apt to grow fierce at the notion that we are being controlled or ruled by anyone or anything.

Such resistance makes us the perfect target to be held under the sway of a rule of some sort without our even knowing it.

Given the nature of our society and its habits and patterns for work and school and transportation and holidays, a fair amount of our lives is under the influence of a rule that is not of our own choosing, whether we are willing to admit it or not.

Our jobs, our schools, our churches, our relationships all dictate to us the daily and weekly shape of our lives. They proscribe when we get up in the morning, when we eat, when we arrive home, how long it takes us to make the trip, and which days of which weeks we have to do certain things.

They have a direct effect one way or another on the ways that we allocate all of

our resources, including our time and our energy, for the largest part of our days.

Those closest to us have a certain kind of hold on us as well. Any part of the crowd of significant others in our lives is demanding of our time and energy. Their lives and ours, by virtue of our relationship, are structured and shaped by the call to be in the relationship in the first place and our desire to be attentive to it.

To fail to notice the reality of such things is to have our heads in the sand, to believe in an illusion about the amount of control that we have over our lives.

I am not saying that these relationships and commitments are all bad things, only that their hold on us is a reality and that any one of us who seeks to live a life of attention to God must take them into account.

And in so doing, we must acknowledge that they do not always take into account our needs for rest and for prayer. They do not always take into account our longing to be with God.

It is the Rule of Saint Benedict that does take these things into account. It gives us a glimpse of how to balance our lives between prayer and work and community and rest. Thomas More, a writer who lived in the monastic world, said, "In the midst of our lives we can live the spirit of this rule." More and more, I am coming to see that is true. And that it can change us.

I am still trying to learn to turn my longing for the presence of God at all times into something that more closely resembles being aware of the presence of God in all things. And to learn how to order my life in such a way that there is balance between my prayer and my rest and my work and my community. And to go from working without stopping to praying without ceasing.

And I am convinced that there are some secrets hidden in the writings of an old monk.