By late summer 2002, my husband and I had been dealing with infertility, cancer, insomnia, and business challenges for more than a decade. We were deeply in love and had been married for fifteen years. But no matter how hard we tried, we could not manifest our long-held dreams for family, work, and personal fulfillment. Instead, our lives were drenched in loss and grief.

Starting a family had proven to be difficult for us. We tried Western medical procedures, acupuncture, and a long list of other methods, but we could not conceive. Every month, we lived through the cycle of anticipation, timing, waiting, and then a deep feeling of letdown when I didn’t get pregnant. The months turned into years, and the years soon became a decade. The strong urge in my body to create new life with the man I loved remained unfulfilled. My hope to have my own journey of motherhood, beyond the painful experience of being raised by a mother dealing with alcoholism, seemed to be slipping away.
Meanwhile, after six years of working tirelessly on his communications company, my husband was faced with the fact that his business was not sustainable. Despite the long hours he dedicated to making calls, going to meetings, and completing writing, design, and web projects, he had to accept that he would be forced to close his office.

Underlying these struggles and disappointments, a family tragedy unfolded. One of my older sisters was diagnosed with breast cancer. Over the next three years, as the disease progressed, I cared for her and her family, brushed her thick black hair as it fell out, and experienced the impossible sadness of packing boxes with her journals, pieces of clothing, and photographs for her little girl to have one day. On the day of her funeral, I held her six-year-old daughter’s trembling body in my arms.

My heart was broken, and the atmosphere of grief pervading my life intensified. I became acutely aware that anything could happen to the body, and the vulnerability of this truth pressed down heavily on me.

Out of this heaviness, I began to experience insomnia. My nights became unpredictable, as I often found myself awake, unable to fully sleep. My psyche could no longer contain the pressure of handling all I could not control and of holding life and death so closely together. I tried many remedies, but none of them worked well for me. The best I could do was to manage the long and difficult nights. I would listen to meditation tapes, rest on the sofa, cry with frustration, or take a bath.
Together, these circumstances had a cumulative and troubling effect. I felt caged in, unable to influence or control what was going on. I found myself living with layers of loss.

So when a good friend of mine suggested that we get away and spend some time at the Abbey of Gethsemani, a Trappist monastery in rural Kentucky, my husband and I listened. Over the years, she had found solace and spiritual encouragement from spending time with the community of monks that lived there. In need of spiritual support and desperate for some clarity about how to navigate our future, we decided to go. We knew we could not change what had already happened, but something needed to change.

We made plans to visit the abbey for a week that same October. Neither my husband nor I knew much about monastic life or the path of a monk. We were not particularly familiar with the writings of the renowned monk and author, Thomas Merton, for whom the monastery was best known. We only knew that we were craving to ease our pain and find a way to live with the unexpected circumstances and tragedies we had faced over the previous decade. I held on to the belief that life had more to offer me than disappointment, sadness, and fatigue.

At the monastery, I hoped to find peace—in the mystical ambience, the chanting, the silence, and the absences of constant striving and worldly desire. I imagined that at Gethsemani I would be able to relinquish all my problems and worries.
My husband and I scraped together the money to go, and under the orange glow of early fall, we traversed the country, traveling by taxi, plane, and car to finally land at this unassuming place with the simple address: Monks Road, Trappist, Kentucky.

Arrival

It was evening when my husband and I arrived in Louisville, Kentucky, so we headed straight to the small guest cottage we had rented near the abbey. Finding ourselves unable to settle down and sleep, we got out of bed and drove along the dimly lit, single-lane road to the monastery in time for 3:15 a.m. Vigils. (Monastic life consists of seven periods of communal prayer a day: 3:15 a.m., Vigils; 5:45 a.m., Lauds; 7:30 a.m., Terce; 12:15 p.m., Sext; 2:15 p.m., None; 5:30 p.m., Vespers; and 7:30 p.m., Compline.)

It was a clear and crisp October night, with the rural Kentucky sky brimming with stars. The monastery was easy to find, being the only building on a long stretch of empty road. We pulled into the parking lot and followed the walkway that led into a compound of buildings. We found our way into the stone church, taking seats in the assigned section along with a handful of other guests, who, like us, were bundled in sweaters and wearing sleepy looks.

We watched the hooded monks arrive in the silence of the night, tucked deeply into themselves. For the next half
hour, they chanted the psalms in English, recited prayers, sat in silence for a while, and then stood up in unison and filed out of the church. As we drove back to our cottage, I had an intense feeling of doubt. The simple Shaker-style of the church along with the monotonous sound of the monks singing the psalms in English left me uninspired. My romantic image of a monastery shattered. I didn’t have the feeling that these monks, who had renounced the world, were being swept away into some celestial transcendence.

Around noon later that same day, we headed back to the monastery, which I could now see was set among open fields of tall grass and rolling hills. With only a few hours of sleep, I was tired and in a funk. “What are we doing here?” I asked my husband, as we trudged up the walkway to the hospitality center. “We’re here to meet some monks,” he said with a smile. I was hesitant but followed him up the stairs. I knew that the only direction for me at this point was forward, so I kept moving, even with my doubts.

As soon as we entered the abbey’s reception area, I felt more at ease. There were several monks in their black-and-white robes, smiling and mingling with the guests in an atmosphere that was warm and welcoming. They were keeping alive the rule of Saint Benedict, the founder of monastic life, who in the sixth century wrote: “Let all guests who arrive be received as Christ, because He will say: ‘I was a stranger and you took Me in.’”

We walked over to the reception desk, where we were greeted by a friendly older monk. We introduced ourselves. This was Brother René. He looked to be in his seventies. He
had perfectly straight posture and a broad smile accentuated his high cheekbones. He spoke in a calm, even tone and moved at a steady pace. I noticed the deliberateness in his gesture as he handed me the daily schedule of meal times and prayer periods.

He told us about the nearby hiking trails, the evening talks in the chapel, and the bookstore in a nearby building. We chatted about where we were from, and I also asked him a few questions about himself.

I discovered he was of French-Canadian ancestry and from New England, which, coincidently, was similar to my grandmother’s heritage. I also discovered he would be celebrating his fiftieth anniversary as an ordained monk during the upcoming weekend and that a special jubilee Mass would be taking place to mark the occasion. I was struck by this detail, since my parents had recently celebrated their marriage of fifty years, and I realized it was a lifetime.

As my husband looked at some maps at a nearby table, I continued talking with Brother René. He asked me more about myself, and I told him about my work in education and about being married for fifteen years and not yet having children. “It’s been difficult,” I said. “I’ll keep you both in my prayers,” he replied. I softly thanked him and prepared to leave.

We were silent while I gathered up the various schedules and information, and then, on impulse, I leaned slightly forward into the desk dividing us, looked up at him, and unequivocally asked: “Are you ever lonely?”
He paused for a moment, gazing down at his folded hands. I stood still, and to my own surprise, I did not feel compelled to explain or justify my question. In truth, I had no idea why I would ask such a thing at that moment. He looked back up at me with his kind brown eyes and simply said, “No, just as you have had a companion in your husband all these years, I have had a constant companion in God.”

I didn’t say anything back in response but only received his words. In that moment, the gulf between us seemed to close, and we were held together in a place of grace. Little did I know that this monk would become my teacher and that I would learn from him how to respond with greater trust and confidence to the difficult circumstances of my life.

Within the first day of arriving at the abbey, the new path I had been seeking opened up, almost imperceptibly, without my even realizing it. All around the monastery, the fall leaves were changing from shades of green to golden yellow and burnt orange. And there I was, turning with them, changing from one season of my life to another.

**Immersion**

My husband and I gradually acclimated to the rhythm and pace of Gethsemani. I attended most of the daily prayer periods, ate my meals in silence in the guest cafeteria, took slow walks on the grounds, and sat quietly in the garden
while writing in my journal. My husband met with some of the monks who made themselves available to the guests: one was a published poet and another was a charismatic monk who gave daily evening talks that weaved together his stories of sailing, pieces of literature, and nuggets of spiritual wisdom.

I soon found solace in the church. The interior had been renovated in the Shaker style, with simple crossbeam arches, birch-wood pews, and white walls. There were no large crosses, no paintings on the walls, and no sizable statues or ornamentation. Only a small wooden statue of Mary was displayed, the honored Mother of Gethsemani, with the illumination of one candle placed beneath her. Here, she watched over all of us.

The walls of the church held a silence I could feel in my bones. I liked it. Its weight was interior and had a different measure. At the monastery, I began to notice my tension between surrendering and resisting. In my interior storm I was like that candle flickering, taking shelter in the stone church. I felt the light in God, in myself, seeking union. God a verb. Bringing forth. Not a blazing fire or a bolt of lightning but a small voice, craving a listening that was carved, a listening that required silence to be heard.

The presence of the monks, along with the steady sound of their voices blending in unison as they chanted the psalms during prayer, was encouraging. As I looked over at the entrance to the monks’ quarters, where the sign above it read “God Alone,” I felt a nudging inside of me, something stirring and inviting me in.
During the week, Brother René and I exchanged words only sporadically and briefly. I was prepared for this, since when I asked him about the monks’ vow of silence, he informed me that at Gethsemani they were permitted to speak but only with intention and purpose, as they did when assigned to the reception desk or to offer hospitality to the guests.

Yet even without talking frequently, I felt a palpable connection to him. I was aware of his presence as he took his place in the pews for the daily prayers, and when we gathered in the small chapel to recite the Rosary, or as the guests and monks walked through the church courtyard together in silence after the evening Compline. Often, he would glance over at me, and we would exchange a look of recognition, a nod, or a soft smile.

The monastic way of life at Gethsemani intrigued me. During the day, we rarely saw most of the monks. They were busy living the Benedictine philosophy of work and prayer. They prepared meals for the guests and the community and took care of the grounds. They made cheese, fudge, and fruitcake in their workshops to fulfill orders from their online store in order to keep the monastery self-sufficient—truly the medieval meeting the modern.

After a few days into our week-long stay, I began to notice that while the monks always entered the church for prayer dressed in the signature black-and-white robe, it was each monk’s favorite footwear that stood out as his most distinguishing and recognizable feature. These
devoted monks expressed their individuality with their shoes: Birkenstock, Clark, Ecco, Rockport, and Timberland.

One afternoon, my husband and I sat under a two-hundred-year-old Ginkgo tree in the heart of the monastery’s garden, enjoying a conversation with one of the monks who was a poet. We talked about a range of things, from the variety of human emotions expressed in the psalms, to the need for the monks to wear good shoes in order to stand and walk on the stone floors of the monastery. He told us that the monks used to wear donated shoes, but because of the intensity of their backaches from standing and walking on these floors, they were now permitted to order shoes from various catalogues.

“What kind of shoes are those?” he asked me, staring intently at my suede brown loafers. “Maybe I should try a pair.”

I told him I would send him a catalog, which I later did. Who knew how important shoes would be for a life of devotion!

On the third day of our visit, I was overcome with fatigue as I continued to struggle with insomnia during my nights at the guest cottage. I sat in the church as the dawn appeared through the small square windows, casting its pink light on the stone wall. While saying the morning prayers, all I could focus on was the heaviness in my legs and my aching lower back. I felt just like the monks with their backaches. Here I was, wanting to reach beyond myself, and all I could focus on was my strained and tired body.
After Mass, I remained in the church among the monks who were sitting in silence, with the cowls of their white morning robes covering their heads. Since my sweater also had a hood, I imitated the monks and pulled it over my head, creating a cave for myself. *God, I am stripping away all my images of you, and I don’t know what is left. I just don’t understand any of it, I prayed.*

As I sat quietly, I was drawn into my body, weary from not sleeping well and from all the effort and difficulty of the past years. I closed my eyes and leaned back into the wooden pew, absorbing the energy of the monks around me steeped in prayer.

With each breath, I sank more into the early morning silence, and deeper into my body, until my breathing seemed to form a union with the atmosphere around me. I felt a seamless connection between myself, the monks, and the presence of God. As I absorbed this moment, I sensed the tender touch of divine love in me, so gentle and full of compassion. I did not have to get away from myself but, rather, I needed to get closer to myself. The seeds of surrender were opening in the intimacy of this deep, interior listening.

Here at the monastery, my prayers began to change. My internal litany started to fade away, and I welcomed more emptiness. The heavy weight inside of me began to lift, allowing some light to penetrate the density. The monks and guests created a force of prayer that formed a strong and sturdy net, holding all who came searching, all who arrived with a need. I was in the right place.
One evening, after the night prayer, as the monks were leaving the church on their way back to their quarters, Brother René came over to me in the courtyard. He handed me some folded papers.

“I wanted to share my notes for the talk I plan to give to the community as part of my jubilee,” he said, referring to his golden anniversary as a Trappist monk to be celebrated at the abbey over the weekend.

“Thank you,” I said.

“My talk is based on the conversation we had when we first met,” he added. “Please slip the papers under the door of the hospitality office when you are finished.”

I held the loose sheets securely in my hands. We said good night, and I watched Brother René’s black robe become a silhouette as he walked to his room. The night air brushed against my cheeks. I stood still for a few minutes, struck by this gesture of trust. I had come here for me, seeking answers for my life, and yet, I had touched the life of this monk preparing for his milestone. I looked up at the stars with an overwhelming sense that there was a pattern to what I was seeing, even if I did not know what it was.

The next morning, I sat in the monastery garden and pulled out the papers I had stored safely in my journal. I scanned the handwritten words filling the pages, deeply moved that I was being brought into such a private experience. I began to slowly read Brother René’s words:

In my years at Gethsemani I was not lonely, because I have not been alone. You, God, were my companion in
life. We went to choir together and in the refectory we sat next to each other. At work in the barn, there was only You and I as we talked through the day. And the meals I cooked were for You. When I worked in the garden and gave advice to the novices, it was You I was speaking to. . . . Love is the force, the common bond of our life in God, for God is love.

The pages overflowed with his awareness and gratitude for the presence of God infused in the daily moments of his fifty years in the monastery.

I felt quiet inside, absorbing the intimacy of the moment and savoring his words. I took out my travel-size watercolor set, dipped the small brush into my water bottle, and in my journal created a few quick paintings of the garden. What was Brother René doing at this moment, I wondered? I imagined his companionship with God filling him with peace and joy.

Later that day, when I slipped his notes underneath the door of the hospitality office, I included one of my watercolors with a note of thanks, letting him know how much his writing touched me. I now recognized the mystery and gift in our meeting even more. I wrote in my notebook: “All I know is something has touched me deeply—more deeply than I can understand at this point.”

That Sunday, the day of Brother René’s celebration, the church was filled with people from the surrounding community attending Mass, along with the monks, the retreatants and guests, and Brother René’s sister and
brother, whom he had introduced me to in the morning. I sat in a pew toward the front so I could see the altar. My husband was beside me, quietly observing everything.

I watched intently as Brother René prostrated himself in his white robe on the bare stone floor of the church. His outstretched arms and straight body formed the shape of a cross. It was the same posture he had taken when he accepted the life of a monk fifty years before, and now, he fully inhabited it.

I was drawn to this compelling image of surrender. My eyes softened with tender tears. The melodic prayers and songs of the community permeated the church and filled me. I could sense I had been led here, that this juncture in my life would be a defining one.

Return

Our week at the monastery soon came to a close, and it was time to go home. I somehow knew my time there had been a turning point. When we returned to San Francisco, my husband and I agreed we would try one last treatment to conceive. I wrote to Brother René and asked him to pray for us as we faced this uncertainty. He wrote back within a week, and thus began our dialogue that would last for many years, about surrender, hope, faith, mystery, loss, God, and the power of love.