

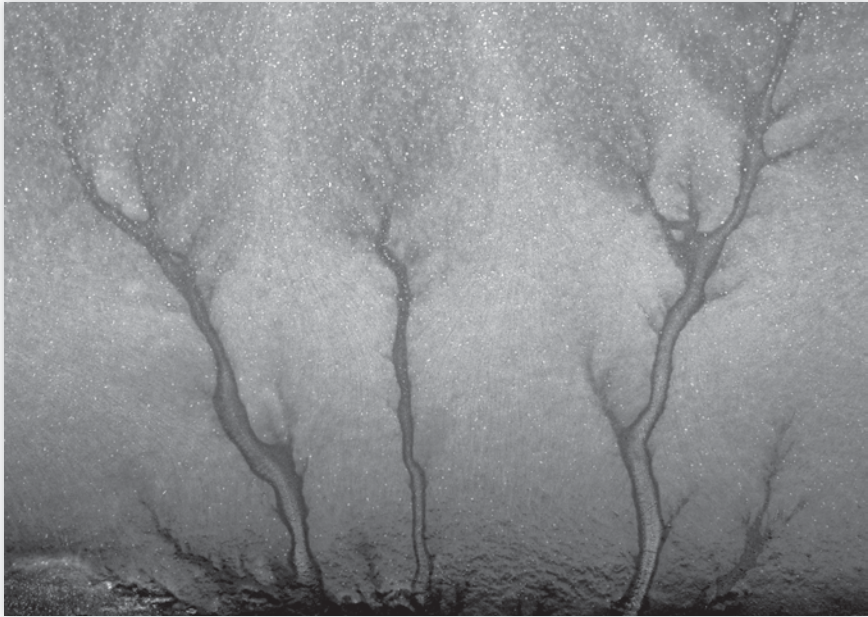
THE ART OF PAUSING

Meditations for the
Overworked and Overwhelmed



Judith Valente - Brother Paul Quenon, OCSO - Michael Bever

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Edited by Judith Valente

Poems and Reflections by
Judith Valente - Brother Paul Quenon, OCSO - Michael Bever

Photographs by
Brother Paul Quenon, OCSO



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PAUSES WRITTEN ON OUR DAYS

Perhaps you are sipping a steaming cup of tea at the breakfast table. Out of the corner of your eye, you catch a robin swoop down and settle on a window sill. You stop. You watch the bird through the glass and it watches you. You note the amber barrel of its chest, the flint-like eyes. The encounter lasts but seconds. Then you both fly away.

Or perhaps you are standing at a busy intersection during rush hour in a large city. Suddenly a pink message slip floats to the pavement, carried on the wind. It has drifted out of an office window or slipped from a pedestrian's shoulder bag. You imagine the journey that this slip of paper has traveled, the person for whom it was meant, who now might never receive its message.

Or perhaps you are chanting the Psalms at dawn in the towering chapel of a secluded monastery. As the singing pauses, you hear a monk's hungry stomach growl. The sound offers an odd counterpoint to the chant's melodic line and reminds you of your abject humanness even in the midst of grandeur.

All three incidents reflect moments in stasis. They seem to interrupt the flow of time. We stop, look, listen. These are haiku moments.

Throughout the ages, Japanese poets have written brief meditations aimed at drawing out something of the sacred in every season. For the contemporary person seeking to slow down amid the tyranny of Twitter, the stress of the slow commute, and the seemingly endless demands of work and family, haiku moments provide pauses written on our days. Those who honor these moments share something in common with the African tribesmen who stop periodically while traveling on safari. The tribesmen pause to allow their souls to catch up with them on the journey. It is both a time of rest and a time of awakening. Sooner or later, we all need to let our souls catch up with the rest of our lives.

This book of such moments, accompanied by brief verbal or photographic reflections, is an attempt to do just that. It is meant especially for those who, like me, want to live a more contemplative life but rarely have the luxury of pausing throughout the day to pray the Psalms, or sit quietly with a candle burning, meditating for a half hour in the same chair every day. It is for those of us who are overworked and yearn for moments of respite in between rushing to catch a plane, respond to email, do the laundry, change a diaper, or meet the other myriad demands of our 24/7 world.

The Benedictine writer Imogene Baker once described the contemplative life simply as “be where you are and do what you’re doing.” Like the way of contemplation, poetry propels us toward a state of heightened attentiveness. Of all the poetic forms, haiku might well be the most contemplative. These slender threads of writing lead us toward T.S. Eliot’s “still point” of the mind where we encounter the marrow of an experience, what Eliot called “the dance.”

The poems and reflections set down here are the work of three writers who inhabit very different worlds. But for each of us, the reading and writing of haiku is an essential spiritual practice. Brother Paul Quenon is a Trappist monk of the Abbey of Gethsemani who studied under the great spiritual writer, Thomas Merton. Brother Paul writes from the confines of a cloister and with the boundlessness of one who has spent a lifetime contemplating what really matters. He is the author of four books of poetry and a talented photographer. His images accompany many of the poems and reflections in this book. Michael Bever is a retired educator, a doctor of theology and an ordained Disciples of Christ minister who was drawn later in life to Catholic traditions. He combines Zen and Sufi practices with his Christian heritage. I am a broadcast journalist who covers religion news for PBS-TV and the author of two poetry collections and a book on contemporary monastic life. As a retreat leader, I try to help busy professionals

like myself slow down, find more balance and tap into the transcendence of the everyday.

Brother Paul, Michael and I may write from different vantage points, but we are fellow travelers on the same journey. Our quest is to uncover something of the particular and, perhaps, the peculiar. In that sense, we share much in common with the tea master Sen yo Rikyu who recognized the preciousness of “one time, one meeting.” With our haiku practice, the three of us seek to memorialize something of each day.

For Brother Paul, the writing of haiku is an integral part of his daily meditation practice. “In meditation, I aim for a simple awareness of the present moment,” he once told me. “My haiku is an articulation of the gift of that moment, a brief conclusion to the time spent in silence. Being short, the haiku will not become just another distraction.” For me, the reading and writing of haiku insures that I experience at least a few brief moments of stillness and silence daily. It leaves me with a greater sense of having *lived* the day. Michael came to haiku after suffering a stroke and enduring years of heart disease. The meditative practice of writing not only sustains his soul, but also strengthens, in every sense of the word, his heart.

This book, like the best haiku, grew out of happenstance, serendipity and the urge to connect with others. I first met Brother Paul in October 2008 when I was sent by the national PBS-TV program *Religion & Ethics Newsweekly* to report on the fortieth anniversary of Thomas Merton’s death. Merton had been Brother Paul’s novice director and had encouraged him to write poetry. When Brother Paul told me he wrote a haiku a day, often after long meditative walks, I became intrigued.

I boldly suggested that we begin a haiku exchange. I thought it would be interesting to see what emerged from our diverse environments. He writes as one steeped in silence and the ancient prayer rituals of monastic life. His surroundings are 4,000 acres of woods, lakes and fields in central Kentucky. I write as a modern,

married professional woman living in both the metropolis of Chicago and the college town of Normal (significance noted!) in central Illinois.

At first we were like two people in the early stages of dating — each a bit unsure of how to relate to the other. Brother Paul's haiku were honed by years of practice and patient observation. Mine were often dashed off on scraps of paper in short pauses during my work day or when riding in a train or a taxi. His resembled delicate water color paintings. Mine often fell back on my journalistic training, presenting black and white images of the events of my day. Some even referenced the news. Eventually, I learned from Brother Paul to not merely record the story of my day but to look beyond to the story *behind* the story.

After two years of riding in this virtual van together, Brother Paul and I added Michael as a welcomed hitchhiker. Michael lives in Claremont, California, at the base of the San Gabriel Mountains, a far different landscape from the rolling knobs of Brother Paul's Kentucky or my central Illinois prairie.

For Michael, haiku is a lightning flash that illuminates a particular moment for both writer and reader. He seeks in that moment what a photographer might call the *punctus* in a photographic image — the center of attention. He taught me that it is not necessary to explain a haiku, or even to understand it. What is essential is to ponder.

In this book, we have followed the classic form of English-language haiku: three lines of five, seven and five syllables. Over the centuries, haiku masters have experimented widely. Some haiku contain more than 17 syllables, others consist of merely one line, like this one by the American poet Allen Ginsberg, written not long before his death:

To see Void, vast infinite, look out the window into blue sky.