

FATHER THOMAS – GENTLY WAITING FOR THE BEGINNING

For most of the last 30 years, our abba, Father Thomas, has been an indefatigable whirlwind jetting around the world teaching, leading retreats, writing books and preaching the good news of Centering Prayer. He racked up so many frequent flyer miles traveling to far-flung places like the Philippines, the Dominican Republic and South Korea that he could rest in the executive lounge to wait for his flights. These days, however, Thomas is finally allowing himself to return to the more secluded monastic life he once knew. He concedes that at 92-years-old he doesn't have the energy he used to. But he gets around pretty well with his walker at his home in the infirmary at St. Benedict's Monastery in Snowmass, Colorado. I'm on a mini retreat at Snowmass and Father Thomas has kindly invited me to visit.

It is late September. The cloudless western sky is Cobalt blue and a brilliant array of fluttering golden Aspens lights up the steep mountain slopes. The fall days are sunny and warm but the nights are chilly – a reminder that winter comes early to the Colorado Rockies.

When I first spot Father Thomas, he is literally hopping out of an SUV. He explains that his physical therapist taught him the best way to leverage himself out of a chair was to suddenly “pop up” – sort of like a heavyweight lifter doing a clean and jerk. In his civilian clothes – a plaid shirt, gray work pants, and Patagonia down vest -- Thomas looks more like one of the cattle ranchers in the valley than he does a Trappist monk. And, of course, he is wearing his ever-present black knit cap to keep his head warm and his thoughts flowing.

When we first meet, he seems quite energized -- having just returned with other monks from a neighbor’s house to watch Pope Francis on TV. (The monks still don’t have newfangled gadgets like a flat screen TV.)

He marvels that the Pope publicly cited Dorothy Day and fellow Trappist, Thomas Merton, as examples for the rest of the world to follow.

“How are you filling your days?” I ask.

“At my age I have to spend most of my time just following doctors orders,” he kids. “In addition to my personal physician, I have a

physical therapist and four specialists. Everybody is a specialist these days,” he laughs.

I had hoped to take Thomas out to lunch, forgetting that he is not allowed to, now that he is back at St. Benedict’s. Except for medical care at the Aspen hospital, he almost never ventures out from the monastery. The one exception was his trip three years ago to Boston to attend a conference with his dear friends and fellow mystics, the Dalai Lama and Brother David Steindl-Rast.

In addition to a lack of energy and the monastery rules, there is another reason Thomas does not dine out. As he explained, he has difficulty swallowing -- so most of his food is either finely chopped, pureed, or liquid. I did manage to sneak him a few almond cookies from a fancy New York bakery. Technically they weren’t on his plan, but at 92, Thomas has become younger and more flexible – and occasionally bends the rules.

Depending on his strength, Thomas still spends time each day reading and writing. Books line the top of the desk in his room. And the

gazebo-like solarium across the hall is filled with all kinds of popular magazines, scholarly journals and Christian and Non-Christian periodicals. One disappointment is that he doesn't have the energy to participate in regular worship with the rest of the community. For several years he could make his way to the chapel and slip into Mass just for communion -- but now even that is too draining. As Thomas explained "I can't really go down to communion anymore because I may not have the energy to get back!" (Fortunately, one of the younger monks serves communion in the infirmary after Mass each day.)

During our visit, Thomas did solve one mystery. For over two decades I have heard him often say that, "the minimum time recommended for Centering Prayer is twenty minutes, two times a day." But I never heard Thomas share what his own practice was. The answer is that along with his doctor's visits, physical therapy and work with Contemplative Outreach, he sets aside three to four hours a day for silent prayer. (I wondered if this might be a gentle nudge from the Holy Spirit to double my own daily Centering Prayer practice.)

We reminisced about Chrysalis House, the lay contemplative community in Warwick, New York that Thomas nurtured in the 1980s and early 1990s -- and remembered fondly Mary Mrozowski, the “Amma” of the house who died suddenly in 1993. For a while we sat transfixed listening to David Frenette’s gentle teachings on his DVD about spiritual transformation through centering prayer that Thomas had not seen before. After viewing the first half of the video, Thomas was so moved he called it a “great treasure” and offered suggestions about how to make David’s teaching more widely available to advanced practitioners. I asked Thomas if I could come again to visit next April. “Sure,” he said with a broad smile and a chuckle, “but I may be dead by then!”

“Then I will pray for you to have as vigorous health as possible,” I offered.

“Well,” Thomas said, becoming more reflective, “it would be better to pray that God’s will be done.” He paused a moment and then added, “after all, I don’t want to overstay my welcome here on God’s earth.”

We sat silently for a few moments longer in the late afternoon sunlight.

Thomas continued slowly, “as the Buddhists say, everything is temporary. And as we believe, everything is an expression of the Divine. Smiling broadly, he concluded, “I’m hoping to go back to the Divine, whatever that is.”

I wanted to stay longer, to drink in this sweet passing moment, but Thomas had graciously given me an hour and a half and I didn’t want him to deplete his limited energy any further. We both stood. He opened his long arms and huge hands to give me a fatherly hug good-bye. Thomas has never been a touchy-feely sort but we lingered a moment in a warm embrace. Perhaps he sensed my need for a hug.

As we parted, it struck me as remarkable that this man -- who endured a lonely childhood under a stern, demanding father and a withdrawn, sickly mother – has become such a warm, loving father to so many of us around the world. As I drove out along the gravel road back to Rte. 82, I wondered if I would ever see Thomas again. It had been a perfect, beautiful, warm fall day. But the temperature was dropping and winter comes early in the Rockies.