

## My Unificationist Memoirs Chapter 67

J. Scharfen  
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(Written in September 2020, after six months of COVID-19 lockdown).

The purpose of monastic solitude is to strip away all worldly distractions in order to allow a person to focus on God. Thus, for centuries and throughout the world, monks have sacrificed their family connections, remained settled in one community, renounced position and wealth, lived in sexual abstinence, embraced silence, and worked in the most humble settings, all in order to place normal concerns behind them, to serve God and humanity through the charism of prayer. Monks conceived of themselves as a living sacrifice, laboring at the heart of the Church's communal life of prayer. Essential to this perspective is the conviction that prayer possesses transcendent effect and reciprocates an eternal and absolute love. As a young man, I thrived on this training and savored this life.



The noted Trappist monk and author, Thomas Merton, wrote that solitude can make a person eminently



sane or perfectly crazy, history being replete with examples of both - the difference in outcomes solely attributable to the presence or absence of God.



Currently, much of the nation has been sequestered in a pandemic induced, very un-monastic solitude, with none of the spiritual discipline and all of the frustrations commensurate with isolation. Over the course of the past six months, I have missed my son's graduation from medical school and my mother's funeral at Arlington National Cemetery, forgone the flight back to Virginia to attend my only daughter's wedding at Fort Myer's Chapel, cancelled my service trips to Vietnam and Zimbabwe, and as I write this at home with my two dogs, I should have been swimming off the coast of Kauai and drinking rum in a beachfront vacation home. Meanwhile, fires have ravaged California, my friends' homes have burned, some for the second time, and we have been on pins and needles awaiting possible evacuation while we don't dare venture into the orange tinted outdoors because of the unhealthy conditions caused by smoke.

Deprived of my morning swims for the last week, thanks to the apocalyptic air quality, my body is starved of its normal ration of endorphins. I don't just paddle around in the pool. I swim hard for 4,000 to 5,000 yards and occasionally more, nearly every day of the week. There must be a depressed psychological state associated with endorphin withdrawal, because I definitely feel it.

Solitude can make a person eminently sane or perfectly crazy. Which will it be? Many commentators have attributed the social unrest currently roiling the country to the extended quarantine imposed on our citizens. Personally, I suspect there might be something to this. Despite my years of spiritual discipline, I find myself drawn into the political maelstrom by virtue of my reading and podcast diet. Whipped to frenzy by the rhetoric of all sides, by the day's end, I'm exhausted and need to wean myself away from the ceaseless commentary. I crawl into bed only to dream of wildfires climbing our steep hill or cultural warriors toppling my favorite statue of Ulysses Grant or Teddy Roosevelt.

Quarantine has reduced the civil tolerance requisite for healthy debate. Our country needs a timeout from politics and the outraged incitement from advocates of all persuasions. Have we gone mad? A few of us can withdraw to our meditation cushions and restore our equilibrium, but many of us lack these skills. And it shows. We have racial violence and murder. Our political campaigns are not animated by policy debate but relentless personal attack. Our social fabric unravels. We hate our fellow citizens, and despise our political opponents as deplorables or communists. In these conditions, God cannot be present. So yes, we have gone mad.

Each morning, I rely on my monastic discipline and pray before dawn for the healing of our country. I trust the transcendent power of prayer. I withdraw to my meditation cushion and I watch my breathing, fill my heart with gratitude, and return to my center. My original nature awakens to the unity of being and my mind tingles with the love of God. In perfect unknowing, I rest, breathing in and breathing out, restoring my capacity to listen and to love.

I can say with certainty, politics offers no solutions to our troubles. Only forgiveness, love, and the restoration of unity offer hope for our present times. So, find a cushion and sit for a while. Walk in the woods or along a beach. Let go of grasping, gaining, and resentment. Breathe deeply and remember, we live for love.

It's the only way we all win, or really, any of us win at all.