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"A Voice in the Silence"

"Watch out!" the European woman screamed. "You wouldn't want to fall from up HERE."

It was a calm March afternoon in Big Sur, California. I was posing for a photograph at the famous Bixby Creek Bridge, an impressive and historic structure on the Pacific Coast Highway. Bixby Creek sat three hundred feet below me, just beside the mighty Pacific Ocean, which roared and crashed into the beach with aplomb.

On this, my first visit to California, I had stopped at the bridge en route to the New Camaldoli Hermitage - a Catholic monastery of Benedictine monks located on the side of a cliff overlooking the Pacific. I had never been to a monastery, nor am I a Catholic. But Big Sur seemed to be calling me, and I knew better than to resist.

For months before my trip, Big Sur had been gradually seeping into my mind. While searching for vacation destinations on the Internet, I repeatedly saw references to this magical place in California, located somewhere between San Francisco and Los Angeles. It was often referred to as being "otherworldly," a description which I would come to agree with. A favorite singer had just released an album of songs based on the Jack Kerouac book Big Sur, which I promptly read in its entirety. I knew I had to see the place for myself.

Further Internet searching had led me to the monastery, which seemed like an ideal location for me to stay during my journey. The prices were affordable and the views spectacular, if the pictures on the web site were to be believed. And I was fascinated by the idea of living in solitude with monks, despite my general lack of religious belief.

Driving up to the monastery is something of an ordeal in itself. A narrow, one-lane bit of pavement meets the highway and then curves and winds up the cliff for more than two miles. The combination of the narrow roadway and the steep drop-off down to the highway and the ocean fosters a certain sense of anxiety, as well as a building sense of anticipation to see what might be found at the road's end.

After more than 10 minutes of slowly ascending the cliff -- watch for animals and pedestrians, the signs warn -- I finally reached the monastery complex and found that the pictures had failed to do justice to the breathtaking views of the ocean below. It was as if a gorgeous landscape painting had come to life.

As I arrived after the monastery gift shop had closed, I found a piece of paper with my name and a map to my quarters attached to its door. Immediately I noticed that no key was provided for my room, and I soon realized that the doors were simply left unlocked. This was certainly no Motel 6. I followed the map and settled into my room -- one of nine private rooms for guests on individual spiritual retreat.

I stopped for a moment to take in the expansive view. Sunset was approaching, and the shimmering blue water of the Pacific Ocean blended seamlessly into the pink hues of the last sunlight, and these seamlessly again into the white-blue sky and the scattered formations of dark grey clouds. And just beside a cloud that looked vaguely like a jet airplane of the sort I flew in to get there -- at its nose -- was a small crescent sliver of blurry white moon.

The monastery, as I would soon find, is a place of silence. There is a common misconception that all monks must take a strict vow of silence, which is not the case here. However, there is a no-talking rule. Around the retreat rooms and in the shared kitchen, speaking is simply not allowed. There is no cell phone coverage there, in 2010, and no phones or TVs or radios or Internet in the rooms.

A sign on my desk promised that "guests can count on the gift of silence." Contemplative silence. And indeed, during my four-night stay, I ran into several other retreatants in the kitchen, and neither of us said a word. It felt strange and unnatural at first. I wanted to say hello, and to learn something about what would lead a person to come there. And yet, I felt strangely compelled to honor this rule, and proud to have done so.

Just up the road from the retreat rooms are the residences of the monks themselves, and I frequently wondered about them and their activities. According to the literature in my room, the monks attended services in the chapel four times each day, starting at 5:30 a.m.

Though I was raised by my parents as a Jehovah's Witness, I had left that faith many years earlier, and now considered myself something of an agnostic. Jehovah's Witnesses have very strict rules about not attending services of other churches -- they even forbid setting foot on property belonging to other churches -- and even though I no longer felt the need to obey this rule, I had not yet taken the opportunity to violate it.

I stayed at the monastery for five days, and spent most of my time reading, relaxing, and enjoying the silence. "Put the whole world behind you and forget it," read a framed piece of paper that hung on the wall of my room, and that is just what I did. Certainly I had tried to put the world behind me before, but I found that my odds were much better in Big Sur. Maybe this had been the spiritual experience I'd been searching for without even realizing it.

Retreatants at the monastery are invited to attend services with the monks but are under no obligation to do so. While I was curious about the services -- and the monks -- I was reluctant to take the next step of doing something about it. My ignorance of Catholicism and fear of violating some protocol or custom made me even more hesitant. I had quickly developed a great respect for the monastic way of life, and I certainly did not want to do anything improper -- or embarrassing.

But on my last night at the hermitage -- when the evening bell rang for Vespers -- I worked up the courage to make the short walk to the chapel. As I entered the mighty wooden door, a fellow retreatant -- clearly sensing that I was a Catholic beginner -- handed me her songbook and program. The service had not yet begun, but already I felt welcomed.

As I sat in the pews and watched the monks file into the chapel, I found myself fascinated by the process and the customs of the faith. With incense, candles, and holy water, it was quite unlike the Jehovah's Witness services I had attended as a child. Vespers, it turned out, is an evening service of singing and prayer. I followed along in my songbook, and listened intently when one of the monks rose to read from the bible. Near the conclusion of the service, the monastery's Prior waved holy water onto the churchgoers, and I felt a drop land just beside my right ear.

I walked out of the chapel with a great sense of peacefulness. The fear and anxiety I had when walking in was now gone. In some not insignificant way, I felt changed. The service and the experience of spending time at the monastery had provided me with a kind of spiritual awakening -- one that was not necessarily tied to Catholicism, but to a greater appreciation of the beauty of the universe and the inherent goodness of man and the value of life.

All of which made me think back to the incident a few days earlier at Bixby Creek.

As the European woman was getting ready to take my picture -- as I was thinking about my smile and what to do with my hands and whether or not to cross my arms and the angle and what was visible behind me and all the rest -- I found myself taking a single step backward without looking. And suddenly I lost my footing, and my right foot had nowhere to put itself, and I began to lose my balance. It was then that she called out to me, telling me that I wouldn't want to fall from up there. And no, I wouldn't. And when she said so, and when my feet were back and planted down again, I turned my neck and looked beneath me and saw the steep drop I nearly took into oblivion.

I very nearly offed myself at the Bixby Creek Bridge in Big Sur. What would that drop, that descent -- what would it have felt like? What would I have screamed? What would the woman have said, or done? What about my parents? Would that have been a good place to die, better than a lot of other possibilities like a car crash on the interstate or a hospital bed? And what did it mean that I didn't die, or did it not mean a damn thing other than I should watch where I'm standing?

I never found the answers to these questions, and perhaps I never will. But staying at the monastery, attending the service with the monks and the retreatants, and feeling the holy water -- these things made me realize that the answers would be irrelevant. I was still alive, and I vowed to somehow do justice to my continued existence.

