

## Living the General Dance at Gethsemani

Review of

*A Matter of the Heart: A Monk's Journal, 1970-2022*

By Paul Quenon, OCSO

Foreword by Fenton Johnson, Afterword by James Finley

Rhinebeck, NY: Monkfish, 2024

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Reviewed by **Megan Way**

Brother Paul Quenon offers up deep reflections with a light touch in his collection of journal entries, *A Matter of the Heart: A Monk's Journal, 1970-2022*. With this journal, Brother Paul reveals with greater intimacy the “useless life” of a Cistercian monk that he described in his 2018 book, *In Praise of the Useless Life: A Monk's Memoir*. Whereas in the memoir, Brother Paul recounted his life in chapters with titles such as “Nature, My Guru” and “Contemplation and the Camera,” in *A Matter of the Heart* he gives us a seemingly random progression of musings, poems, observations, dreams and koans, moving decade by decade through his life at the Abbey of Gethsemani in the knobs of Kentucky. In the introduction, Brother Paul describes the rhythmic life of the monks as a “slow circle dance” (xiv). The journal that follows evokes the passage from Thomas Merton’s closing paragraph of *New Seeds of Contemplation*: “we are invited to forget ourselves on purpose, cast our awful solemnity to the winds, and join in the general dance” (297). It seems that Brother Paul, who was a novice under Fr. Louis/Thomas Merton in the late 1950s, has taken seriously his late brother’s invitation.

Although organized by decades, dates and times do not count for much in this journal. The liturgical seasons, the canonical hours, sunrise, sunset, the moon and the stars orient Brother Paul’s life in cyclic time when he describes a scene. Scattered entries that refer to events of world significance – the beginning or end of a war, the election of a pope, the pandemic – jump out as if to remind us that Brother Paul’s life is also lived in linear time. As for where he is in space, there is no variation. The monastic vow of stability grounds Brother Paul’s reflections firmly at the Abbey of Gethsemani.

Reading a journal can be a challenge; read too quickly and you skim over the deep inner life being revealed, not seeing the forest for the trees, or in this case, not seeing the *general dance* for the varied steps. In an afterword, James Finley suggests that Brother Paul’s entries can be read as *lectio divina* – slowly, contemplatively, letting each entry settle in your heart and speak to you. In addition, the stability of place invites the reader to get right into the spaces that anchor Brother Paul’s life.

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The richness of the journal is enhanced by *being there*. Take a stroll with Brother Paul through the abbey to meet his brothers. Monks haunt the kitchen elevator, awkwardly make conversation in the scriptorium, walk around with parakeets on their shoulders (look up “parakeet” in the index to read Brother Paul’s dirge to a fallen bird) and sneak radios under their gardening hats to listen to a ball game. His gentle descriptions of his brothers’ quirks are outnumbered by descriptions of his own. Imagine one of the other monks in his own journal writing, “Brother Paul was dancing on the roof patio again today, when he is supposed to be quarantined for COVID,” or “Brother Paul is letting a bat nest in his room, flying in and out every night. Has he never heard of rabies?”

Keep reading and wander outside with Brother Paul. Sit with him on his meditation (retaining) wall, walk to Thomas Merton’s hermitage or hike up the knobs. The air is bracing in winter and steamy in summer, and Brother Paul will explain the flora and fauna, the night sky, the generous sun, and the men who previously walked these paths as you go. Revel with him in one “magical late autumn night, full of wonders” (53) – a flying squirrel, the northern lights, a quiet opossum and a lazy stray cat. Listen as he describes the sounds of the days and nights on the abbey grounds, including the calls of a dove he has named “Mr. Monotonous” (114).

Pull a chair in close to Brother Paul and engage with the mysteries of life at the abbey – the Eucharist, the Trinity, Christ’s death and resurrection, the mystery of love, the mystery of faith, the being of God. These entries describe the “matter of the heart” (4) that called Brother Paul to the monastery over sixty years ago, and that keep calling him and emerging as his life in play and contemplation and worship.

Take a moment to admire Brother Paul for being brave and vulnerable in this book. In a poem from “Part II: 1980-89” entitled “Writing ’bout Writing” (34-35) he writes:

Sticking out my nose and putting  
It on a page gives me stage-  
Fright. You’ll laugh at my nose.

It cannot be easy to publish one’s private thoughts, and while these are carefully edited and relatively angst-free for a journal, the challenges of grappling with the questions, the mysteries and the pain of the world appear. Heed Brother Paul’s admonition, during the Persian Gulf War, when “Not only are people being crucified, in effect, but love is being crucified” (81), as it seems like it always is. He writes, “Our immediate reactions of fear, alarm or judgment are the easiest way to forget the real work of faith in the face of evil” (110). Sit with Brother Paul in the fear, alarm and judgment of our time, and let his descriptions of all the wonders on an abbey’s grounds in Kentucky sustain you so that you can do the “real work of faith.”

At the end of your abbey wanderings with Brother Paul, join him at his office. In one of the last entries (from “Part V: 2010-22”), he writes that he is starting to clean out his bookcases, and that although he is not expecting death soon, he would “prefer to be like Fr. Bede and Br. Giles who died without leaving a single possession to get rid of” (133). Journals are not exactly possessions, but in this collection, Brother Paul collects what he deems of value so that it will not be lost. Watch as he pages through old journals, finding the gems, tearing them out and handing them to you as you page through this book. He may put the journal remnants in the waste pile, so that no one else is burdened with that task. How generous! Each entry he has chosen is worthy of a contemplative sit or a walk in the woods. Our thanks to Brother Paul can be do just that, and so join in the *general dance*.