

# LISTEN TO THE DESERT

Secrets of Spiritual Maturity  
from the Desert Fathers and Mothers



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PUBLICATIONS

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## FOREWORD



When I set out to write this manuscript I intended it to be a clear explanation of the spiritual journey for ordinary people. I choose this goal for two reasons. First, I'm not capable of a scholarly work, most of which, at any rate, seems to be inaccessible except to other scholars. Second, what has traditionally been labeled "mysticism" and as such to be reserved for the rare "worthy" individual is, in reality, the common heritage and full flowering of Christianity, and therefore ought to be accessible to all of us.

My intention was to use common experiences—experiences that any individual could assent to, could say of, "Yes, that's something I experience"—as a way of leading into an explanation of the zigzag path of spiritual maturity. All of this I hoped to do in fresh language, avoiding as much as possible the stilted vocabulary of ascetical and mystical theology and contemporary religious jargon, which seems to have been hijacked into the service of narrow ideologies, confused psycho-babble, and justifications for dangerous religious enthusiasm.

Now that I've completed the work, I must admit to the hor-

rible sense that all I've done is to scratch the surface of the task I set for myself. Whether I have, at least partially, accomplished my goal, I leave to the judgment of you, the reader. Parenthetically, and by way of analogy, I have a greater appreciation for the numerous disclaimers I hear regularly from parents who feel they've hardly done enough in raising their children.

Many people deserve, and have, my heartfelt gratitude for their help in preparing this book. First of all, my teacher, Father Wilgis Jäger, OSB, who with patience that appears to me to be heroic at times and providential wisdom, continues to guide me on my own spiritual journey, as he has done for some fifteen years now. I couldn't possess whatever clarity I may enjoy in this subject without him. I am indebted to Mrs. Joan Reich, Rev. James Chaumont, Mrs. Grace Mojtabai, and Mrs. Lorette Zirker, who corrected my glaring mistakes and offered invaluable suggestions to make the initial manuscript readable. I am deeply grateful for the considerable amount of time and the attention to detail that each of them dedicated to the task. Very special recognition goes to Mr. Bob Walker. Only he knows the significance of his assistance in preparing the manuscript for publication. Finally I am indebted to the many, many people I've met along the way who continue to be devoted to the spiritual life. Some I am privileged to live with, my Redemptorist confreres. Others, lay men and women (many are anonymous to me), have been an inspiration during the longer contemplative retreats we shared together in silence. All have given me by quiet example the conviction that it matters how an individual lives his or her life, especially in things deemed trivial. Each person, although I am sure they are unaware of it, has contributed not only to my personal spiritual quest but also to the evolution of consciousness.

GREGORY MAYERS, C.Ss.R.  
AMARILLO, JANUARY 1996

## PREFACE



Student turned teacher. That was one of my main thoughts as I read the manuscript of this book of Father Gregory Mayers. My thoughts went back to the early 1960s, when I taught Greg in our Redemptorist high school seminary, and now I found myself being masterfully taught by my student. As his former spiritual director, I was proud to be reading a work that was evidently a product of a deep spirituality.

Father Mayers digs into early Christian roots and reveals a spirituality that has meaning for our day. What has traditionally been labeled mysticism and claimed to be reserved for the rare worthy individual he shows to be the common heritage and full flowering of Christianity, which should be accessible to all. This book proceeds from many years of experience in his own spiritual journey. His words come freely, and his thoughts flow from a spiritual maturity and a practice that is now natural to him.

The rewards for you who read this book will be great, especially if you follow this suggestion. Although the words and thoughts are clear, they should be read with determination and great concentration. There are concepts in this book that are so fresh they

need to be nourished with silence and reflection in order to grasp what follows.

This is not a how-to manual on the spiritual life. However, Father Mayers explains and encourages a practice that is most helpful and could lead to a spiritual path not previously dreamed of. Do the book justice: Do yourself a favor and take the time to do the practice.

VERY REVEREND MONROE G. PERRIER, C.Ss.R.  
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## INTRODUCTION



Within a few hundred years after the birth of Christ, the thirst for a deepening life of prayer and faith was felt in the deserts of northern Africa. This thirst gave rise to the beginnings of Christian contemplative practice, which flourished in the regions along the Nile. These early beginnings of monastic life attracted many from Egypt, as well as from other parts of the ancient world, and inspired similar monastic foundations throughout the Mediterranean region, spreading eventually to Europe and beyond.

The initial inspiration for this desert monastic movement is largely attributed to Saint Antony of Egypt. Antony was born around the year 250. When he was about eighteen years old, both his parents died, leaving him suddenly with the responsibility of looking after a household. Burdened by these new concerns, he pondered the gospel's passage, "Sell all you have and give to the poor." These words pierced his heart. Unable to ignore them, he soon divested the considerable family inheritance and distributed his money and goods among the poor. For the next fifteen years he inquired into the practices of various hermits and ascetics scat-



tered about the region. While striving to advance in the spiritual life, Antony continued to live near his own hometown, taking on manual work to provide for his needs and giving what excess he had to the poor.

Although he remained dedicated to a life of poverty, self-sacrifice, and discipline, and his reputation has grown considerably, Antony continued to strive for a more complete abandonment to the life of faith and prayer. At about age thirty-five he began pressing deeper into remote places. He stayed for a time locked away in a tomb, where a friend would bring him supplies he needed for daily sustenance. Here he soon encountered temptations of a most egregious nature that, at one point, left him physically tormented, beaten, and all but lifeless. When the friend who had been tending to him found him unconscious in the tomb, he carried Antony to a church, where the local people gathered around for a vigil watch. Stirring back to consciousness in the middle of the night, Antony found himself surrounded by a group of sleeping people. Only his friend has remained awake at his side, and Antony begged to be carried back and locked once again in the tomb, where he could resume his trials. Unable to stand up for prayer, he lay in a state of helplessness as the tomb was shaken by visions of wild animals. Lions and bulls, snakes and scorpions, all appeared before Antony, assaulting him physically, but he remained calm and called out to his adversaries, "If there were some power among you, it would have been enough for only one of you to come."

Soon after this, the building in which the tomb was housed, which had been shaken from its foundations, became once again intact. The demons and the beasts retreated in confusion and disappeared, the pain immediately left his body, the roof opened, and the tomb was filled with light. Aware of the vision, Antony felt his breathing grow steady, and he asked, "Where were you? Why didn't you appear in the beginning, so that you could stop

my distresses?" And a voice came to him: "I was here, Antony, but I waited to watch you struggle. And now, since you persevered and were not defeated, I will be your helper forever."<sup>1</sup>

After this Antony pressed even deeper into the wilderness. He sealed himself in an old fort for many years, living mostly on dried loaves of bread and water. He had little contact with others, but still his reputation grew, and many followers began to congregate in the vicinity of the fort. At last these followers became impatient for instruction and tore off the fortress doors. After many years of seclusion, Antony, quite fit, healthy, and radiant, emerged to an admiring throng.

During a brief public life, Antony performed healings, settled disputes, consoled the troubled, delivered sermons, and inspired many others to take up the solitary life. Little by little the mountains and deserts of the surrounding regions were peopled by those eager to emulate Antony and live a disciplined life of prayer and contemplation. But soon enough he again withdrew deeper into the wilderness. Escorted by a band of nomadic travelers, he went to an inner mountain, where he found a spring of perfectly clear water and a few date palms. He fell in love with this place, and in time he located a plot of ground nearby that was suitable for plowing. He planted wheat for flour so that he could provide for his own needs and those of his occasional guests. What he had in excess he sent back with travelers to the poor of the cities. Antony lived out his days on this inner mountain, sometimes leaving the place to assist the gatherings of monks that were forming in the area, sometimes providing for visitors, but always faithful to the solitary life of prayer and discipline until, in the year 356, he died at the age of 105.

Within less than forty years of Antony's death, monastic life had begun to spread throughout the Mediterranean region. Sometime in the year 394 seven monks set out from their own monastery

in Jerusalem and traveled to visit Egypt. One of the first monks they visited, John of Lycopolis, warmly received them and, heartened by their determination to travel such a distance to a remote and difficult region, asked, "And what remarkable thing did you expect to find, my dearest children, that you have undertaken such a long journey with so much labour in your desire to visit some poor simple men who possess nothing worth seeing or admiring? Those who are worthy of admiration and praise are everywhere: the apostles and prophets of God, who are read in the churches. They are the ones you must imitate. I marvel at your zeal, how taking no account of so many dangers you have come to us to be edified, while we from laziness do not even wish to come out of our caves."<sup>2</sup>

But far from disappointed by these "poor and simple men," the travelers continued on their tour. They recorded just a few of the encounters they had with the desert monks, but they were astounded to witness thousands, even tens of thousands, of nuns and monks living in the areas they visited. And although one modern writer points out that if their estimates of the populations of monks and nuns were tallied together, it would exceed the entire known population of the country of Egypt at that time,<sup>3</sup> we can nevertheless assume that this way of life, largely unheard of before Antony, had, in a very short time, become enormously popular.

By the time these seven traveled to the deserts, the practices of the Egyptian monastic settlements varied widely and were roughly divided into three styles. Some of the monks, following the inspiration of Saint Antony, remained deep in the deserts living eremitical lives, sometimes inhabiting caves of cliffs, sometimes wandering from place to place as itinerant hermits carrying on with their own peculiar practices and having little contact with others. There were also large groups who, under the inspiration of Saint Pachomius, lived together with others in enclosed monasteries and provided for all their needs without ever venturing outside the walls

of their enclosure.

During their travels, the monks from Jerusalem visited the monastery of Isidore but were not able to enter. This was the most extreme of the enclosures, and their only contact was with the gatekeeper, an elderly monk who explained that only those who want to remain inside the walls of the monastery for the rest of their lives were allowed to enter, and once they entered, they never again leave the place.<sup>4</sup> Still other groups of monks had gathered around the teachings and guidance of a single master who had gained a reputation as a gifted spiritual director. These monks built small huts or cells consisting of one or two simple rooms built hastily from crude bricks and mud. Upon approaching one such gathering of monks not far from Nitria, the monks from Jerusalem found that “they inhabit a desert place and have their cells some distance from each other, so that no one should be recognized from afar by another, or be seen easily, or hear another’s voice. On the contrary, they live in profound silence, each monk isolated on his own. They come together in the churches only on Saturdays and Sundays, and meet on another.”<sup>5</sup>

Much of what we know of these early foundations of the Christian contemplative life comes from recorded accounts of outsiders like the ones cited above. These secondhand accounts, such as *The Life of Antony* written by Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, and *Historia Monachorum in Ægypt*, written by one of the seven monks from Jerusalem, circulated widely in the ancient world and were popular and influential. Athanasius knew Antony personally, and his account, written with much passion, has all the elements of a good story. Following along from beginning to end, the reader sees Antony, in the fashion of a mythic hero, set out from his home, encounter many difficulties, pass through an experience of death and resurrection, defeat his enemies, hold to his ideals steadfastly, and set the world aright by his radiant presence. The

account in *Historia Monachorum in Ægypt* is shaped like a travel journal and has all the wide-eyed naiveté and attention to the novelties of encounters with foreign people and places, all the dangers of traveling in strange and hostile regions, that make this genre so enjoyable to read even in our own day.

But when we turn to the direct accounts of the life the desert gathered by the monks themselves, we encounter something altogether strange and foreign. These writings are collections of brief, loosely connected passages that range in length from a few sentences to a page or two. The stories and sayings were gathered by the monks, who circulated these writings among themselves for their own purposes. In these collections, though much can be inferred, we find little direct record or artfully arranged accounts of the sort of life that the monks led. We find no programs for spiritual advancement, no body of doctrine, no specific rules of conduct. When first turning to these writings, the reader might be disappointed, for there is little that stimulates the intellect and imagination, inspires the spirit, or edifies the soul. The sayings of the old men give us a glimpse into a hard life, lived close to the desert floor in heat and cold. These stories and sayings were no doubt quite instructive to the ancients who shared that life and to those who have striven to emulate it since, but they can seem more than a little eccentric by modern standards.

However, as we take up these stories, one by one, it is possible to discover that, driven more by appetite than by hunger, we have grown used to going to our kitchens absent-mindedly, expecting to find a loaf of bread. By opening these writings, we feel as if we have come to a cupboard where we are now faced with only a bag of flour, a box of salt, and a package of yeast, and have no sure ideas about how to transform these into something that will feed our growing hunger. But herein lies the peculiar power of these writings to place us face to face with the old monks. It is the time we

spend with the ingredients—the mixing, the rising, the baking, the buttering—it is the time we spend, before sinking our teeth past the warm crust, that places us in closer contact with the ancient world and allows the strangeness of that world to shape itself, gain texture, and grow increasingly familiar. In these sayings of the old monks, we are slowed down by the raw stuff of the contemplative life, and as we ourselves return again and again to the practice of contemplation, the odd and difficult experiences of the monks recorded in these stories become more and more recognizable, and it grows easier to understand a story like this one:

A certain old man was deeply disturbed by thoughts for ten years, so much so that he was very hopeless, saying: My spirit is a wreck; and as long as I have perished once and for all, I shall return to the world. However when he was setting out, a voice came to him, saying: The ten years in which you have struggled, they are your crown. So return to your place, and I will liberate you from all troublesome thoughts. And immediately returning, he again took up the basic work of contemplation. Therefore it is not good to grow hopeless in any way on account of your thoughts. These truly provide for us a great crown, if, taking advantage, we pass through them with careful attention.<sup>6</sup>

Many of us might find it difficult to imagine ourselves being locked up in a tomb and enduring hordes of ravaging beasts as Saint Antony did. But anyone who has tried, even for ten minutes, to still the mind and quiet the thoughts can appreciate the hardships of this monk. And as with this old monk, as we take up the practice of contemplation, no matter how mundane and fruitless it might seem, bit by bit our life too is transformed. The ego may be slow to give up its grip on what it sees as its central position of control, but much good work goes on out of the immediate sight

of our active mind. Our steady efforts accumulate slowly and settle out of sight. Then, suddenly, quite often during one of those times when the ego has begun to lose its grip and is ready to give up its efforts, those things that once seemed to hinder the practice of contemplation now appear as the very fruits of our steady effort. The practice and the way we must follow become clear and obvious, and the doubts that have prompted us to continue on our way disappear. And when we come to see with an eye that is whole and single and steady, we simply go on with this basic work of contemplation, although now with greater ease and confidence, fully aware that the union we have been seeking was a fact of our life long before we began our search.

It is just this beginning that Saint Antony discovered while locked in the tomb. He had stayed close to his home for a long time, studying to advance in virtue, discipline, and prayer, gathering advice and experience, and putting these into practice. Only after long, dedicated attention did he realize, in a moment of awakening, that all those things that were assaulting him, all the beasts and demons that were binding and piercing him, were always completely impotent and powerless against the truth of his existence. Only then did he notice that the roof that sealed him in in the tomb was porous and transparent. Only then did he realize that the room was filled with an ever-present light. The thirst that began to stir in Saint Antony—and also in the monk who nearly gave up after ten years of desert life—was a thirst for the presence, the certainty, and the peace of just this light.

The practice that Antony inspired was free to form and adapt itself accordingly in each new situation. Just as in his own day variant approaches arose that satisfied the thirst for prayer and contemplation, today there are many approaches to individuals' own contemplative practice. What remains constant, though, are our individual responsibilities—of jobs and studies, alongside fam-

ily and friends, in the midst of disputes and misunderstandings, and other situations both difficult and rewarding. Such contemplative practice, although much different in appearance, is no less vital than the practice of those early desert monks and nuns. Our efforts might seem ineffective, and they might seem to disappear amid the routines of our daily life, but this is as it should be. The salt hiding in the soup makes it tasty. The yeast in the dough turns it into bread. The more hidden the practice becomes in our daily life, the more it disappears to where it can do its work. And, as is so apparent with Saint Antony, much good is attracted to the presence of silence and stillness, and much is set in motion by diligent attention to what is closest to our hearts.

In *Listen to the Desert* Father Mayers has made a few of the most appropriately ripe desert sayings accessible to the modern reader. Drawing on his many years of experience as a contemplative teacher and spiritual director, he offers a simple, practical approach, which is grounded by his own years of practice and clarified with a wealth of insights gained from a careful study of transpersonal psychology. Following the simple instructions found in *Listen to the Desert*, the reader can establish and maintain a regular contemplative practice. This book will be a great help not only for the beginner, but for everyone seeking to advance in the contemplative life for, again and again, the author makes it clear that there is no advance. There is only, always was only, and will be forever only, this unitive experience of ultimate truth that we are best encouraged to uncover by simply not covering it over.

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JANUARY 1996



## CHAPTER 1



### Your Cell Will Teach You

In Scetis, a brother went to see Abba Moses and begged him for a word. And the old man said: Go and sit in your cell, and your cell will teach you everything.<sup>1</sup>

In this brief saying a brother approaches one of the great figures of the desert, Abba Moses. Moses' early life had been an unhappy one. He was a slave from Ethiopia, and presumably a black man. For whatever reason he escaped his early fate only to turn to thievery, laying upon vulnerable travelers and caravans, robbing them, perhaps even murdering at times. Certainly in the desolate regions of Egypt robbery could be tantamount to murder. Abandoning individuals to the arid landscape without provisions or transportation left them precious little hope of reaching the safety of an encampment or village.

Late in life Moses underwent a conversion of heart, became a monk, and submitted to the rigors of training as an ascetic under the venerable Abba Isidore, the priest. Abba Macarius urged him to seek out the solitude of Petra, where Abba Anthony had lived his eremitical life and where Moses was to meet a martyr's death along with seven of his brother hermits.

In this concise saying the brother who seeks out Abba Moses must have heard his impressive story from other monks and hermits. Seeking advice from the revered Abba Moses was more than an inconvenience. It was an arduous undertaking. It required physical as well as spiritual stamina to travel afoot into the desolate region of Petra. But the brother had an urgent request of Abba Moses, whose life resonated in the heart of the suppliant brother pilgrim. He begged the old wise hermit for his advice. He *needed* the elder monk's advice. He wasn't looking for answers to specific problems that regularly crop up in day-to-day living. He was seeking the kind of wisdom that is born of facing the suffering and pathos entangled in the very fact of living on this earth.

The advice he received from Abba Moses could almost be taken as a dismissal of the brother's anxious, even desperate, petition. The brother begged for a word from Abba Moses. After weeks of journeying in the companionship of hunger and thirst, fearful of

the wild animals equally hungry and robbers thirsty for bounty, he is told in effect to go back home and stay there: to sit there in his cell and learn the lessons that only solitude teaches.

The spare story gives no hint that the brother took offense or was disappointed in Abba Moses' advice. To the contrary, the fact that the story has come down to us indicates that the brother cherished the advice and passed it on to his brother monks and novices. True, Abba Moses didn't address his deepest yearnings, alleviate his suffering, allay his fears, or read the scroll of his heart and fit its shape with tailored wisdom. Abba Moses gave the brother something more valuable and more easily overlooked in a person's rush for pat answers. He didn't feed the younger monk with eternal wisdom, but rather taught him how to satisfy the hunger which drives us human's into foolishness and trivialities.

And the brother was ready to hear him. The two qualities that are necessary preconditions for this sort of readiness are courage and experience. It isn't at all difficult to imagine that his brother experienced "the wall" in his life. He wasn't like Abba Moses, who might have found the desert of Scetis by accident while hiding during his days as a robber. This brother ran into "the wall," the emptiness that drains off the meaning and joy of living. When the veneer of our humanly conditioned optimism wears thin, we face a harsh reality expressed in the haunting, lingering sense that something terribly important is slipping through our grasp as we age.

Isn't it true of human beings that no matter what we may do, the best of what we name "me" seems to elude our understanding? Why is it that no matter what I do, and even at times do well, I am never satisfied? Why, when I am honest with myself, do I discover that I am always on a hunt, not even particularly knowing what I am hunting for? This experience of inner restlessness embedded in the minute and multitudinous acts that constitute living is the experience of this dear brother, who sought out the company and

advice of Abba Moses, who as a robber was also hunting for an answer to his own restlessness.

Jacob Needleman in *Consciousness and Tradition* tells the story of a New York psychiatrist who experimented once with hypnosis on a young soldier who was his patient. He had given the soldier a posthypnotic suggestion that caused him to stomp his foot three times when the psychiatrist snapped his finger. When asked why he had done such an odd thing, the soldier offered a completely rational and wrong explanation: because he had something in his shoe. The psychiatrist goes on to explain the significance of the experiment:

Do you think the whole of our psychic life is like that?... Do you think that every movement we make, every word we say, every thought we have is like that? Could it be that we are always “fabricating” in a sort of low-grade posthypnotic haze? Because there’s one thing I am sure of, though only now do I see its importance: the moment I asked that soldier why he had stamped his foot, there was a split second when *he* realized that he had not *done* anything at all. A moment when he realized that the fact was simply that his foot stamped the ground “all by itself.” By asking him why he had stamped his foot, I was in effect suggesting to his mind that *he* had *done* something. In short, I was hypnotizing him—or, rather, I was playing into the general process of hypnosis that is going on all the time with all of us from the cradle to the grave. The contradiction made him blush, and the true facts about the foot-stamping were blotted out of awareness.<sup>2</sup>

The soldier could be accused of lying, if it weren’t for the fact of his hypnosis. In a way he was lying, but it’s an unrecognized lie for it is a shared social lie and thus extremely difficult to detect. Per-

haps it isn't so much a lie as it is a web woven around all individuals entrapping them in a common fiction.

When they began to wake from this shared trance, when they suspected that they were more slaves than free, the men and women of the desert sayings fled their culture to escape the disguises and distractions it perpetrated on their human spirits. It is no small act of courage to face squarely the fictions in our life and the troubling sense that something isn't quite right about our life.

Scapegoating, excuses, self pity, are common disguises that shield us from a deep-seated doubt. These fictions, these acceptable deceptions are the way we distract ourselves from the nagging suspicion that at the bottom of what I call "me" is something terribly disturbing. We dare not look into the nooks and crannies of our cupboard because we are afraid that we'll find it's empty.

Human uniqueness is a blessing and a burden, a source of joy and a source of distress, for when all is said and done we live our lives all alone. When I was very young I asked my father: How do I know that the color I call "red" is the same color that everyone else calls "red"? How do I know that what I see as red, you see as green and someone else sees as blue? This young child wasn't asking the perennial question of epistemology. He was asking something far more fundamental. Am I all alone living in a kind of fool's paradise? What's real? What can I trust? What's permanent? What's reliable? How can I know that we are not all fooling ourselves? Is what is called life nothing more than a common conspiracy to distract us from some terrible reality? How do we confront the suspicion we hardly dare acknowledge that what we consider real, meaningful, authentic, is just a kind of dream, a fiction arising out of a common trance?

This is the urgent issue that the brother wanted Abba Moses to address. Simple answers, pious platitudes, even sincere assurances, won't slake the thirst for genuine advice in the face of this

human dilemma. “Go sit in your cell, and your cell will teach you everything.” Only this kind of humility in the face of transitory existence could meet the brother’s disconcerting experience of life. Abba Moses’ wisdom is a sounding of the depth of the human experience. As we follow it down into the inner reaches of human awareness, we discover that his advice blossoms into layers of meaning.

“Sit in your cell” means on the surface to shut yourself in a space defined by four walls and a ceiling. It is a voluntary imprisonment not as penance or retribution, but as recognition that we are scattered over a range of minor and distracting concerns. Retreating from the active life—or, more accurately, an overly active one—into a cell physically cuts off disorientating and hypnotizing “worldly” concerns. It is a concrete acknowledgment that the self is ill at ease.

Abba Moses’ advice also points to something deeper and inner. “Cell” means “self” as well. Sit in yourself! Just as you learn every detail of an hermitage if you never left it over three or four years, so you’ll learn every detail of yourself. In this living cell one learns the discord between how I think of myself, how I sense myself to be, and how I behave. We learn that consciousness is not synonymous with its content, that thoughts and impulses and emotions come and go, but consciousness itself is like the stage on which these actors play out their parts. We discover something of our self that we cannot quite grasp, a subtle sense of “I am” that endures no matter what else of us changes. This brings us to the doorway of a vast and liberating emptiness that is more positive than any verbal, mental, or emotional assertion of self can ever hope to be. This threshold leads to what is so overwhelmingly positive that images and descriptions of it pale like stars upon the arrival of morning light.

There is a final sense to the word “cell,” meaning “the liberated

self,” wherein life becomes transparent and obvious. The differences in forms remain, of course, but since the self is transparent, there are no barriers between forms. This very existence in all its multiplicity of expression at this very moment is “it” all together all at once. It is what the human heart craves, and it has always been obvious. “Your cell” has no walls, neither physical ones of mortar or wood, nor walls of flesh and bone, nor psychological ones defining a separate, independent self. The marketplace is your cell.

Abba Moses’ “cell” is a metaphor for the imprisoned self. If our appetite for the truth is strong enough to shore up our crumbling courage battered by the relentless onslaught of life’s experiences, then we are rewarded by the emergence of the essence behind what is considered one’s self.

To break down the wisdom in Abba Moses’ response so we can mentally digest it is to miss the point. For it isn’t that “it” must, or even can, become understandable to us. It is we who must become transparent to “it,” much as Saint John of the Cross indicated in his simile, of the sun passing unimpeded through a clean, clear windowpane.

If we accustomedly flee our loneliness and the lessons it has to teach us, hiding behind the excitement around us and in social company, then we will likely greet Abba Moses’ advice with a goodly portion of dread. If, on the other hand, we are weary of the shallow trivialities of the social order and afflicted by the inane discourse of most human communication, then we are likely to feel relief at the advice: “Go and sit in your cell.” Whichever way we react, we do not enter our cell alone.