

The Vision

It was time to meet his mentor and he dreaded it. A decision had been made.

The authorities had decided that he didn't belong. "Your style has something wanting," the Director explained. It seems that there were certain types that fit into this complicated life without physical love, owning nothing and requiring absolute obedience to a superior's whims. He did not fit that profile, the Director said. He was frivolous at times that showed a lack of dedication. He often broke the sacred time of silence that began after final prayer and lasted until after Mass and breakfast the next morning. Yes, he was an excellent student but seemed not to have the kind of piety looked for in the dedicated Christian pedagogue. Never mind that his practice teaching in schools showed that he might have superior aptitude for the fundamental objectives of this order....to teach the poor. He could do that as a secular person just as well, couldn't he? The council had decided that he should leave, but there was no need for haste. He could collect his thoughts and belongings, meager as they were, and leave on the weekend.

"You can call your parents to pick you up. I shouldn't tell anyone if I were you. It might unsettle some of the other Brothers in some way. You should leave on Sunday, I would say. I would suggest the afternoon while the others are at prayer, but you can decide as long as departure is inconspicuous. It is always easier for everyone concerned to go without any fuss."

That meeting with the Brother Director was like a pronouncement of doom. This was his family, the only family he ever had really, this motley collection of young men thrown together presumably by a common need to

pray, educate and achieve a level of sanctity over their lifetime. Noble causes, a mission, opportunities to make a difference. To shape children's souls. To dedicate life to lofty ideals and to share with one's brothers purity of spirit. He was crushed, bewildered. Am I such a bad person? He shuddered. This was completely unexpected. He had planned to finish college, take the final vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, teach for the rest of his life, probably get a PhD in literature, write fiction, help young men reach their potential.

In panic he went to his spiritual advisor for advice. Was it possible to be dismissed in this trivial way? Unlikely, he was told sympathetically. But what did he want to do? Was this the right thing for him? Thomas Merton found a way to be secular and a monk at the same time if he decided to remain a Brother. How about the vows? Did they seem right for him? This was God's business after all, but God's business came in many flavors Brother Ed counseled.

Over two years ago he had learned about the mystic, a woman his mentor knew intimately but he had never met, the woman that apparently had visions, who had somehow walked with Jesus in her special inward eyes, was told about life and death, the beginnings and end of the world. The meanings of things kept secret. Her name was Cora. Is that any kind of a name for a genuine God seer he had thought at the time? Proper names for the chosen were Theresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Francis of Assisi. "Cora" seemed so...plain.

But Brother Ed allowed him to read some of her writings. They seemed to him amazing. Actually talking with God, seeing Him, being given Godly secrets which she should share with the world like Fatima or Guadalupe. She was about God's business and she wasn't a nun, his advisor said. Ed thought to himself that this young man was so impressionable, wanting to

believe in the supernatural experience, the special nature of those closest to God.

He asked his advisor if he had seen Cora recently? Somehow this vision thing had something to do with his decision, he felt. Brother Ed shrugged as if to say that it was irrelevant and changed the subject back to the problem at hand.

“You decide. They can’t decide for you no matter what the Director told you. You have done nothing wrong and I think you will make a wonderful teacher. Your whole life is ahead of you. Take this opportunity to choose what is best for you. You will do well no matter your conclusion. I will back you in any case and you know that.”

They spent hours wandering together in the fruit orchards and pine trees of the Napa hills talking, sitting quietly, taking in the splendid view of the valley miles below, the air fresh with the smells of recently picked grapes. He asked the important questions. Why? What are they thinking? The *many are called but few are chosen* biblical reference came to his mind. Why aren’t I chosen? As the day waned, lights blinking on in the distant city, they made their way back silently to the chapel and prayed together and he was left that night with his own unspoken thoughts. He wept himself asleep. He did not pray. This was not right, not fair. He tried to calm himself, tried to be objective. It was impossible. He awoke the next morning very angry.

Instead of going to classes...Latin, The English Novel, Calculus II, Ancient History and Moral Theology...he removed his robe, put on a jacket and walked to town. By the time he returned, hours later, he had decided.

And so, having come to his own council he met his adviser in one of the great halls of the college sanctuary. Stout, affable and energetic, Brother Ed came through the door. They embraced and the elder Brother sat

down opposite him in a large, overstuffed chair. It was a giant room, very formal, brocades everywhere, a large cupola surrounding the ceiling like a plaster of paris crown molding. Huge windows with ponderous, red draperies. Framed pictures of saints. Stuffy.

He began to explain what he planned to do. If he wasn't wanted, he would leave. What was the point of staying even if it was possible to appeal? He would finish college elsewhere. Maybe he wasn't religious or holy enough anyway. Sex would be nice, he said, an attempt to be amusing.

The Brother listened attentively but at the exact instant the word "sex" was uttered, his friend took his eyes away and began to stare at the ceiling where the ornamental crown molding was. It was as if he saw something no one else could see. The young man turned to look over his shoulder. He saw nothing. The older monk continued to stare at the ceiling and opened his mouth as if in wonder. He began to stand and followed what appeared to be an apparition of some kind around the ceiling border, over to the opposite corner of the room and then around to the front. He slowly lifted his arms as if in supplication and fell to the floor landing heavily on his back. He commenced to shake convulsively, his whole body rattling and jerking, his tongue out, eyes back in his sockets showing only white.

"Holy shit," the young man said aloud. "He's having a vision." Hang out with mystics, you become one?

And then the seizures stopped. The Brother lay, his breathing coming to normal, his eyes closed. After some minutes, he picked his beloved friend up with arms around his body and stretched him out on the uncomfortable straight-backed couch. He wondered if he should call someone, but who do you call for help with a vision? Did Padre Pio have a vision doctor, he wondered? Instead, he waited patiently. Finally, the

Brother's eyes opened. He looked at the young man and propped himself up on one elbow, then sat straight, stretched and said, "I'm sorry, my friend. I must have dozed off. I haven't been feeling well lately."

He looked incredulously at his spiritual guide. "What did you see, Brother Ed? Did Cora share the experience with you?"

The older man's eyes narrowed` paused and said, "What are you talking about?"

"You had a vision, didn't you?"

They talked for a few minutes, the older man got up, put his arm around the young man and they headed for the door.

"I just fell asleep. I'll be fine after a good night's rest. What have you decided?"

"I'm leaving, Brother," he said. "We'll talk before Sunday."

They strolled together across the expansive grass in front of the college, unspoken questions lingering, each deep within his own thoughts. Of course it turned out that this was the first of many grand mal seizures the Brother had most of the rest of his life. The young man would never quite look at religion the same way again, either because of the way he perceived he was treated or because he concluded that real visions didn't happen. He would not take the trouble to contact Cora when he had the opportunity. God might be capricious, he thought as he left the following Sunday with his mother, alone and without any goodbyes and finally, without any regret.

