

Final Transformation: *Are You Ready?*

The caterpillar had lived her life fully, donning her chrysalis of death when called. She knew not what glorious transformation awaited her!

Preparing to move into your next life is the ultimate *Do it Yourself* project, although you won't find any DIY brochures beyond funeral planning and living wills. Nothing on how to live as if today were the last day of your life.

Which is perplexing when you think about it. We prepare for every other milestone, from First Communion to high school graduation, and marriage to business meetings. Why not prepare for what is arguably the most personally consequential moment of our lives?

Some of us will do so, of course. We'll receive the *gift of urgency* (author Bruce Kramer's words) courtesy of a terminal diagnosis. Suddenly we'll realize we must prepare, and fast.

Benedictine Oblate and volunteer Noreen Haiston had such an experience. Diagnosed at age 72 with

leukemia, she decided to undergo the harsh treatment she needed to survive. It cost her her health, her hair, and precious time with her family.

Incredibly, Noreen said afterward that she was grateful it happened. She said the process helped her grow closer to God, and that she was now ready to move into the next life. When her leukemia returned a couple of years later, Noreen declined treatment. She died grateful for a good life, a great family and a steadfast faith that she bolstered with prayer.

How can we learn to *keep death daily before us*, as St. Benedict urges, so we're ready to say *Yes* whether we have time to reflect or not? So that we live daily the life to which we're called?

We put the question to our Sisters, Oblates, volunteers and friends. Each offers insights particular to her experience and ministry in the hope that her reflection might help you work through the question yourself.

Show me, Lord, my life's end and the number of my days; let me know how fleeting my life is. Psalm 39 ▶



Sr. Sandra Brunenn, OSB

Letter from the Prioress

About a year ago, a friend asked Pope Francis “At your age of life, don’t you think it’s time that you slow down?” Francis replied, “At my stage of life, I need to move faster!” What an expression of engagement in the daily adventure of living well!

More recently, Francis said that a Christian lives with a “sense of expectant yearning for our final encounter with God.”

Francis seems to be peacefully anticipating death while living life fully.

This issue of *Connecting Point* invites us each to consider how we strike this balance in our own personal lives. May it nourish your own personal reflection about the wondrous mystery of living and dying well.

Know that during November and again before and after Christmas, we remember at daily Eucharist our living and deceased Sisters, relatives, Oblates, benefactors, and friends. That includes you! May we all be ambassadors of peace in our troubled world!

Live while you are alive

Sister Sheila McGrath, OSB saw many sudden deaths throughout her career as a hospital chaplain. Today she calls on that experience for guidance in preparing for her own eventual passing.



Sister Sheila McGrath

“Death is not just *out there*, but could be today as you run an errand,” she says. “Keeping death before you daily means, for me, using my talents and gifts wisely.

Not burying them, but using them for others, and fully.”

To check her daily progress toward her intention, Sr. Sheila says she does an end-of-day Examen – a prayerful reflection on the day’s events – before bed.

“I use the Galatians passage on the fruits of the Spirit, asking how I was for love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and

self-control. I ask myself if I can do better. It helps me be more at peace, and ready when my time comes.”

It also helps remind her not to die before her actual death.

“Sister Kathleen Aubry spent so much of her life crippled with arthritis, yet she was always so full of life; so affirming,” Sr. Sheila says. “My mother had macular degeneration, glaucoma, sciatica and eventually a broken hip. She needed a walker. Even so, she showed me how to live right up to death. She showed me how to live fully during the time I have.”

It is a lonely experience to be at the deathbed of someone who is full of regret; to hear him say how he would love another year to do the things his heart had always dreamed of. ... We should never allow our fears or the expectations of others to set the frontiers of our destiny. – John O’Donohue

Ask the deep questions

Sister Mary Schmidt, OSB experienced her share of death



Volunteer Lori Glowinski poses with Sister Maggie Buergher.



Sister Mary Core shares her Christmas village with Sister Stefanie MacDonald's preschool class.

-serving in a parish. She says while preparation for it takes an entire lifetime, it's not a linear path. And it's full of pitfalls.

"We're all going to stumble and fall," she says. "We have to get up and - like Benedict says - *run while we have the light of life.*"

Sr. Mary says Scripture – founded in love of God – gives us the tools we need. As we read it and other spiritual (and even non-spiritual) works, she suggests asking ourselves some deep questions:

Why am I in this time and place?

How will I be able to make positive choices in difficult times?

Jesus said the kingdom of God is within us. How can I find God in myself?

Jesus said we are to care for one

another. Am I doing that?

We obviously won't know what death brings until we're there, but working through the questions will help allay the sometimes-debilitating fear of the unknown that can accompany thoughts of death.

"Every time we get up in the morning what's going to happen next is unknown," Sr. Mary says. "That's a given. But we can prepare for the unknown by being who we're called to be."

The point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer. – Rainer Maria Rilke

Forgive now!

Lori Glowinski works with dying people. A hospice nurse (who served as a Benedictine volunteer

while exploring her vocation), Lori often listens to patients reminisce about their lives, friends and families. Usually they express gratitude. But they also, sometimes, feel regret and even anger.

Sometimes they're angry they're going to die before they're ready.

Lori says that in her experience, those who fight death most are those who have not given it any thought beforehand. Often the greatest source of their agitation comes from unreconciled relationships.

"I've learned that the small things really do not matter," she says. "Don't hold grudges. They can grow into monsters."

Retired hospital chaplain and Benedictine retreatant Lynn Batcher agrees.

Sister Bobbi Bussan greets guests at Benet House Retreat Center.



“I saw it all the time,” she says. “It was common to hear things like, *I don’t care if she comes to see me or not. She didn’t come to see me when I was fine, she doesn’t need to see me now.* There’s a tremendous amount of pain in that.”

Both suggest we immediately begin a practice of forgiveness.

“Forgiveness is a process,” Lori says. “Start now. Today. It’s the most important way to prepare for death.”

To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was you. – Lewis Smedes

Live the good and the bad

Sister Mary Core echoes advice to live fully every day, with the caveat that living fully must include the entire range of our experience.

“Are you having a bad day?” she asks. “Live it fully, too.”

Sr. Mary recalls a novel her Wisdom Seekers book club discussed earlier this fall; *A Man Called Ove* by Fredrik Backman explored the need to live with zeal and gratitude despite grief and disappointment.

“Every day asks us for an investment. At the end of the day, we either can say, I did the best I could with the day, time and people I encountered, or we can say, I copped out.

“If we’re angry or frustrated because we are here instead of someplace else, the day is lost. The chance we had to live fully and learn something is lost. If we just tolerate the day, it’s wasted. If we accept it – even if we don’t like it – we can grow.”

When it’s over, I don’t want to wonder

if I have made of my life something particular, and real.

I don’t want to find myself sighing and frightened, or full of argument.

I don’t want to end up simply having visited this world. – Mary Oliver

Let go and let God

Sister Bobbi Bussan, OSB says “keeping death before us daily” references more than our final passing. It also refers to the mini-deaths that happen throughout our lives, including traumas and illnesses. Noreen’s original diagnosis of and treatment for leukemia was a mini-death. Even trivial disappointments can cause us to die a little bit.

“These little deaths help us let go of ego, pride and desire,” Sr. Bobbi says. “They help us let go of anything that is an obstacle to seeking God. These deaths are part of our spiritual journey.”

It may be ironic and is definitely countercultural, but letting go of our false sense of control actually results in empowerment. It reduces the clamor in our own heads, allowing us to let go and let God.

“Choosing not to control the uncontrollable is not just about aging and disease. It’s also about little things like going to a restaurant with slow service and not getting bent out of shape,” Sr. Bobbi says.

“You have to accept you don’t have all the power. It has to be more about empowering than powering over. The sooner you let go, the sooner you find inner peace.”

By choosing to let go, then, we empower ourselves with wisdom, and peace.

(He) felt that generosity would establish a pattern in his heart and mind to help him let go of life when the time was ready. – Joan Halifax

How to let go ...

Giving up the illusion of control is wise, certainly. But ... how?

Benedictine Oblate Florrie Dammers suggests we try Centering Prayer (see sidebar). An ancient form of prayer that was revived after the Second Vatican Council, Centering Prayer is meditation with a spiritual focus. It seeks to cultivate interior silence in order to make space for God.

Florrie says Centering Prayer helps her relinquish any expectation of control, filling her with a sense of peace. She says it helps her stay present to the moment.

“Centering Prayer allows you to practice letting go,” she says. That is, we begin by letting thoughts go, and gradually gain willingness to let everything go.

“The idea of death becomes less of a negative. You still have the sorrow of leaving loved ones behind, but God’s in all of that too. It’s all part of being human. Centering Prayer has helped me see death as much more of a promise than a threat.”



Oblate Florrie Dammers

So much of faith has so little to do with belief, and so much to do with acceptance. Acceptance of all the gifts that God, even in the midst of death, grants us. – Christian Wiman

Let loved ones go, too

Lynn Batcher is retired now, but she used to spend a lot of time on the oncology floor of the hospital where she served as chaplain. Patients there often had been sick for a long time. Most eventually accepted their prognosis, even if their families did not.

“I often heard things like, Mom, you’ve got to keep trying. You were never a quitter. Don’t give up. The capacity for denial of death is extraordinary.”

The lesson is this: we not only have to prepare ourselves to die, we have to prepare to let our loved ones go, too.

“It’s a very significant and

meaningful way to prepare for death,” Lynn says. “The people we love most are part of us. When they die, part of us dies. But after a while, they are resurrected in us in new ways.”

As are we, in them. And the more time we spend, now, reflecting on this, the more prepared we will be to rise, gratefully and with joy, into our next life.

“Whether it’s with the living or dying, we’re on holy ground,” Lynn says. “The Spirit is alive and moving in ways we can’t understand.”

Christ didn’t “just” die; he came out on the other side of his suffering transformed: he was—astoundingly, cataclysmically, turn-everything-upside-down-for-all-time resurrected. Something new had been made of him. – Heather King

Not an end, but part of living

Many spiritual thinkers and authors have written about death. They all have something to teach us. That said, nothing will be so clear a teacher as our own mortality.

Bruce Kramer recorded his own discoveries as he faced terminal illness in *We Know How This Ends*:

It isn’t enough to connect with friends. It needs to be done with passion, abandon, love, and light. There is no time to hold grudges, be afraid, and not forgive. There is no time for games. There really are places to go, people to see, and things to do, and time is wasting. There is a gift of joy and passion, love with abandon, friends who aren’t afraid to say, “I love you.” ▶

Sisters Ruth Ksycki
and Mary Schmidt
plan their spring
gardens.



... That is the gift of urgency, and I
am thankful for it.

Accepting the gift of urgency
will help prepare us for what's
next. We will have forgiven and
asked forgiveness, expressed our
love, tried to live fully, and with
integrity.

Whatever we're doing at the
moment we die – sitting in a
meeting, walking across a street,
lying in a hospital bed – it will be
consistent with the person we've
tried to be. Our death will become,
to quote the poet bell hooks, *not an
end to life but a part of living.*

Inspire Yourself

In addition to Scripture, God speaks
to us through Nature, art, music,
other people and other writing.
Below is a list that includes written
works cited in this article. Enjoy!

Essays, poems and letters:

Mary Oliver
Brian Doyle
Rainer Maria Rilke

Books:

John O'Donohue, *Anam Cara*
Fredrik Backman, *A Man Called
Ove*
Joan Halifax, *Being with Dying*
Christian Wiman, *My Bright Abyss*
Heather King, *Redeemed*
Bruce Kramer, *We Know How This
Ends*

Center Yourself

Centering Prayer is very much like
the eastern tradition of meditation,
but the goal is different. The goal
is contemplation, or union with
the Divine. Although many paths
lead to contemplation – prayers
that employ silence, such as the
Jesus Prayer and Lectio Divina,
for example – Centering Prayer is
extraordinary in its simplicity and
appeal.

To experience Centering Prayer,
choose a quiet place and time of
day. Sit comfortably, back straight.
Begin by saying a short prayer first,
to prepare yourself for this sacred
time. Close your eyes and take up

a sacred word – choose a one- or
two-syllable word like Peace, or
God – to signal your intention
to withdraw from the everyday
world and go into the deepest
part of yourself. Thoughts will
surface, but when they do, gently
take up your word again and
return to interior silence. Begin
with 20 minutes at a time.

Don't be discouraged by how
many thoughts fill your head at
first. By intending to rest in God,
you allow God to take charge
of everything, including your
thoughts!

“In Centering Prayer, you
consent to the presence of
God and the action of God
within you,” Benedictine Sister
Catherine Cleary says. “You
don't say any words. You let go
of thoughts, emotions, feelings,
day dreams. This prayer is an
act of will; it is not effort but
consent. The will consents
to God's presence, to grace.
It consents to let God do the
work.”



Ready for *Life!*

By Sister Mary Jane Wallace, OSB

I recently had some health issues that wiped me out for a while. The doctor put it in perspective when he said, “Sister, you need to think about the end. Do you want to be resuscitated?” I was surprised. I didn’t think my final days were now! Death is going to come, and it’s *not* always down the road! So I’ve been using this prayer to help me be ready, but not for death so much as life! Because by living fully, we prepare to accept death. I hope it helps you, too.

Live slowly. Living slowly runs counter to our culture, but we must slow down to really see, and experience, all that is around us, including each other and all God’s creation.

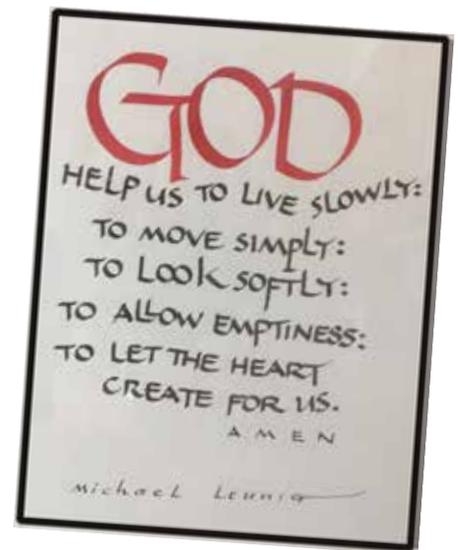
Move simply. At my age, I have to move simply. No more running! But this is about more than physical movement. For me it means moving through each hour enjoying simple things: a warm smile, the sunlight, a card from a former student.

Look softly. I love this phrase. To me it means we must look more gently upon self and others. It means offering more gestures of comfort. It means smiling more kindly and with more welcome.

Allow emptiness. I’ve spent my life acquiring things, and I bet you have too. Now, I’m giving it all away, because we can’t take it with us! But the need for emptiness also implies a readiness for something new. Grace. I’ve found I can say to God, “You are enough.” That things and stuff don’t matter.

Let the heart create for us. As we recommit to living life fully, we open our hearts to what matters. And our hearts tell us what we need to grow into peace.

I have loved my life so much. If I could speak on my deathbed, what would I say? If it were today, I would say, “Thank you, and I love you.” *What would you say?*





Monastery Notes

Embracing the Future with Hope

By Sister Ruth Ksycki, OSB

An amazing sunset of exquisite beauty on Friday evening ushered in our annual Oblate Day on Sat., Oct. 21. As the Oblates gathered, friends re-connected with smiles and hugs.

The day began and was interspersed with the singing of a traditional Hebrew prayer, “Shalom, My Friends,” led by Cynthia Smith and assisted by Lori Carroll. We sang it in a round.

Sister Sandra Brunenn gave a brief update on the progress of the Sisters’ future planning. A key piece of the plan is to envision the monastery complex as a *center of peace and spiritual energy*. Sr. Sandra used Scripture, the Rule of St. Benedict, science and the goal of peace in the global community in her presentation.

Oblate Chuck Brown reflected, “Our call as Oblates is to share that peace with others, in prayer, in speech, and in our relationship to goods and nature. We are to be advocates for justice and peace in our communities as we promote nonviolence.”

During Noon-Day Prayer with the Sisters, four made final Oblation and two became candidates.

A stronger bond between the Sisters and Oblates was the blessing of the day.

For information about the Oblate program, contact Sister Ruth at 309-283-2106 or oblates@smmsisters.org.



Above, l-r: Diane Hanson and Jan Gull became candidates for Oblation. Top: Karen Karczewski, Terry Martz, Marlene Mosage and Lori Carroll made their final Oblation.

Benedictine News

Sisters Sandra Brunenn, Sheila McGrath, Susan Hutchens, Mary Core and Claudia Scharf attended “A Day of Reflection on Migration, and U.S. Immigration” at the Dominican Sisters’ Sinsinawa Mound Center, WI.

Sisters Charlotte Sonnevile, Mary Schmidt, Sandra Brunenn, Ruth Ksycki, Susan Hutchens, and Marianne Burkhard attended the DACA QC Coalition’s “We Are All Dreamers” rally held at the Esperanza Legal Assistance Center, Moline, IL.

Sister Catherine Cleary helped organize the 12th Annual Women’s Interfaith Dialogue at Sacred Heart Catholic Church Parish Hall, Moline, IL. The theme for the evening was “Helping Our Neighbor: Should there be Limits?” This dialogue gathering began in 2005 and now includes people of all faiths. Several Sisters also attended.

Sisters Sheila McGrath and Marlene Miller attended the Annual Subprioress-House Coordinators Annual Gathering hosted by Sacred Heart Monastery, Cullman, AL.

Sister Sandra Brunenn gave a talk during a service commemorating the 500th anniversary of the Reformation at Augustana Lutheran Church in Andover, IL.

Sisters Sandra Brunenn and Sheila McGrath attended the Region 8 Leadership Conference of Women Religious meeting at the Spirituality Center of the Franciscan Sisters in Frankfort, IL.

Seven Sisters participated in the World Relief Fund Raiser held at St. Ambrose University, Davenport, Iowa. “Passport to Peace” was the theme of the evening.

Sisters Marilyn Ring, Catherine Cleary, and Helen Carey attended the Lutheran-Catholic Reformation Anniversary celebration beginning at St. Mary’s Catholic Church and ending at First Lutheran Church, Moline, IL.

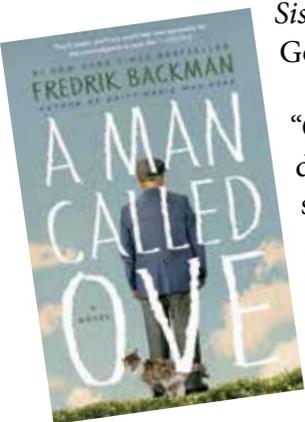
Sister Mary Core offered her *Wisdom Seekers* book club discussions - held weekly at St. Maria Goretti Catholic Church, Coal Valley, IL - to online readers. Sr. Mary introduced it this way:

“Ove (pronounced Oo-vuh) is a curmudgeon. But I was taken by this hard-nosed, tender-hearted Swede. This is a different focus for our book club, since we usually read more spiritual or theological books. That said, there’s a lot of opportunity for reflection in this book about first impressions, loss, anger, judgment, openness, vulnerability, love, and more.”

The *Wisdom Seekers* have begun discussing the role of women in the Bible (which will be posted soon), but you can still access the discussion on *A Man Called Ove* at: www.smmsisters.org/whats-new/2017/10/30/read-with-benedictines/.



Sister Stefanie MacDonald, second from right, attended the Benedictine Vocation Directors Conference at St. John’s, Collegetown, MN.



Coming Up

Sister Bobbi Bussan asks you to save the date for Sister Joyce Rupp, OSM (right) who will offer her Boundless Compassion presentation at Benet House Retreat Center Monday, April 16, 2018. Upcoming retreats and programs can be found at smmsisters.org/retreats/.





Monastery Notes (Continued)

Sharing Feelings, Preschool Style

By Sister Stefanie MacDonald, OSB

How we begin our morning can have profound consequences for the rest of the day. This is as true for you and me as it is for any preschooler. So this year, I'm beginning our morning meeting differently.

We start by facing each other in a circle. In the center of the circle are a palm cross and emojis on sticks. Each student selects the emoji that matches her/his feeling.

Now, these are preschoolers, so we don't actually talk about those feelings yet. When they have finished making their selections, I take an emoji, state the feeling and say why I'm feeling that way. For example, I might pick one that shows excitement, and say, "I'm excited to be at school with my friends today."

Why do it? In sharing our feelings, we share our mutual vulnerability. We build the courage to share our deep selves honestly, knowing that we are worthy of love and empathy no matter how we feel. Social emotional learning expert Lorea Martinez, PhD, says "Naming emotions accurately helps students be clearer about what is happening inside, so they can manage themselves in positive ways and become better learners."

Next, we ask God for help. Our Leader of the Day picks up the palm cross and hands it to the student who was first to share her/his feeling. Again going in the circle, each student shares an intercession for us all to pray for while holding the palm cross. We finish with group prayer.

The students love this. It gives them a chance to transition from home to school, and to put themselves into the right mind - and heart - to interact with others. It's a great way for anyone to begin the day!

Sister Stefanie teaches preschool at Our Lady of Grace Catholic Academy, East Moline, IL. You can follow her students' adventures at srstefaniesabcsblog.smmsisters.org.





Members of the Class of 1975 spent the weekend at Benet House celebrating their 60th birthdays and the 42nd anniversary of their graduation.

They joined the Sisters for Sunday Eucharist and brunch.

Front row, l-r: Darlene Moore Conklin, Patty Sharboro Beck, Cathy McDonald Lechner, Deb Castrey-King, Terri Bolton Schwebke (class of 74), Anne Mapother-Snyder (class of 74), Katie Klein. Back row: Sandy Dunn Farington, Linda Brown Torbert (class of 76), Marcia Daws McRoberts, Connie Gavin, Mary Whetzel.

In Memoriam ...

Helen Ksycki Johnson, '62, died September 22, 2017.

Lester Markey, father of **Barbara Markey, '71**, died September 2017.

Timothea Gentry-Harris, SMA '78, died September 24, 2017.

Luke Feeney, husband **Margaret Tracy, '45** and father of **Kathleen Feeney Piatt, '69**, died September 2017.

Reunion Announcements

Class of 1967
June 1-3, 2018

Class of 1962
July 20-22, 2018

Class of 1964
Aug. 17-19, 2018

Class of 1959
Sept. 28-30, 2018

Class of 1973
Oct. 12-14, 2018

ATTENTION ALUMS:
Reserve your space at Benet House as early as possible to improve your chance of securing space for your next reunion. We fill up years in advance!



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