

Kelly, Timothy, OSB. "Benedictine Education."

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This past summer we had a family reunion, the first one in about 15 years. We gathered together as much of the clan as could be drawn in and had a pretty good time doing it. The generation immediately ahead of me has completely died out, and a fairly good number of my own generation has died as well. As time goes on and as we get older, if we are at all realistic, we acknowledge this as the normal course of events. And though we are saddened by the death of family and friends, we are hardly shocked by the reality of mortality. After all, the mortality rate of the human race is almost 100% except for us few who so far remain!

For me it was fun seeing the nieces and nephews now with their own children, watching them deal with their offspring in much the same manner I used to see their parents dealing with them. In one or the other case I might even have been tempted to say: serves you right!

I listened to conversations of these young ones and watched facial expressions. Some of their ways of saying things and expressing themselves resembled ways I had learned to identify with my family. I was particularly fascinated by a 13-year-old grandnephew who looks much like his grandfather, my brother, who died 11 years before this young man was born.

Telling Stories

Before the day was over it was suggested that we tell stories of the past so that those who never knew their grandparents or even great grandparents might know something of their roots. Unaccustomed as I am to getting up before people, and being so terribly shy, as you can easily tell, I began the process with stories my father and mother used to tell about their parents and brothers and sisters, and I told stories about my father and mother as well.

For instance, I talked about my grandfather Kelly who built a bridge across the Mississippi River all by himself. When we would go out for a drive we always wanted to go to the place where my grandfather had built that bridge. Of course, it was a grand bridge, and we could hardly believe that one man could do this alone -- which he didn't, you will realize. But in our minds at that time our grandfather was the giant who could do such a wonder.

Then there was grandmother Kelly who could stop a storm or a tornado in its tracks with holy water and a lighted blessed candle. She indeed must have been a woman of faith and we eventually outgrew the myth -- but not the faith.

My mother's father was another story. He was a blacksmith, standing about 6'4" or 5" in almost any direction you wanted to see him, according to my mother. When he was cleaning up the shop, he'd move the anvil from one place to another as though it were a bench. One day an uncle drove the model T into the shed -- they didn't have garages in those days -- and because it was parked somewhat crooked, my grandfather picked it up and straightened it out. Now I suppose that if he did do that he at least used a four by four to lever it into place. But it satisfied something in us that was much more important to believe that he picked it up and simply moved it by brute strength.

Other stories were told that day, and it might be interesting to tune in to a family reunion 25 years from now and hear my grandnieces and nephews tell stories about their great grandparents that they heard at a family reunion in 1994. Somehow, what happens to people who hear their family stories is that they learn not the factual truths of history but, more importantly, the roots of values from which they themselves have emerged. I suspect that those who tune in to the myth, and who even understand it as such, end up having a much clearer picture of their own identity.

I learned a lot about my mother and father by listening to their stories, the stories of their parents and grandparents, their brothers and sisters, their own experiences of growing up, of going to school and going to church, of getting jobs, falling in love, getting married, raising a family. It helped me to know who I am by listening to who they were, and I'm certain that many of the choices I've made in life are connected to the learning process I went through in that family of mine.

Yes, it was a learning process. I have a nephew who is married to a Japanese woman, and they have a little boy about five years of age. This past summer his mother took him back to Japan for about six weeks and while there put him in a school so that he could plug in to his mother's side of the heritage. I've been to Japan a number of times and each time am amazed at how people can learn such a complicated language with all those konji that I keep forgetting. Then I look at a five-year-old grandnephew who can rattle off both Japanese and English and wonder why it's so easy for him. But that's what learning is all about.

The Story of Benedict

At the end of the fifth century there was a young man by the name of Benedict who had grown up in a good Christian family in a town now called Norcia in Italy. He was imbued with the spirit of the just and was formed by his family in values that must have been deeply a part of them. He went to Rome to study, but when he found many of his fellow students giving themselves over to lives of vice, he decided to withdraw from there. Eventually, he established monastic communities whose purpose was to create an alternate way of living in this world, a way in which people could seek God in an environment that aided the quest rather than impeded it.

Benedict's journey took him through the kind of preparation that would open his spirit further to the call of God and finally allow him to be available to lead, reluctantly, an already established community of monks at Vicovaro. He knew that this would be a tough job because he perceived that "his way of life would never harmonize with theirs" (Gregory, *Dialogs, II*). His task there was to change an environment that militated against seeking God. It didn't work. It is rather shocking to think that monks could convince themselves that poisoning their abbot is somehow compatible with their dedication to monastic life, but monks have been known to delude themselves in matters of morality more than once in history.

This experience in all likelihood, though tragic in its meaning, was nonetheless a graced occasion for his own advancement in wisdom. God brought him to growth in holiness that attracted "a great number of men . . . to devote themselves to God's service. Christ blessed his work and before long he had established twelve monasteries . . . with an abbot and twelve monks in each of them" (*Dialogs II*).

The events that are recounted in the Life reveal that Benedict was intent on establishing the kind of environment that would foster the seeking of God in a community of men who would support one another in this holy pursuit.

When eventually Benedict would go to Monte Cassino and write his Rule for Monasteries, he would do so with an eye to establishing an environment that would not be an escape from the world but an alternative and mutually supportive way of living in the world while seeking God. In chapter one of The Rule, when he speaks of the different kinds of monks, he tells us that he wishes "to draw up a plan for the strong kind, the cenobites" (**RB 1**:13). These are monks "who belong to a monastery, where they serve under a rule and an abbot" (RB 1:2) The monastery is the environment in which the tools for good works can be employed, for "the workshop where we are to toil faithfully at all these tasks is the enclosure of the monastery and stability in the community" (**RB 4**:78).

We can hardly look at The Rule and not come away convinced that the vast majority of what Benedict has to say is dealing with the building of an environment that supports seeking God and enables the monks to encourage one another in this pursuit of holiness. The many chapters devoted to outlining the *Opus Dei*, our daily community prayer, and the practice of *lectio divina*, or the slow and deliberate reading of the scriptures and other similar writings, are a major focus for this environment. His structuring of community meetings for the sake of communal discernment, of meal times with reading, of work that supports the community, of silence that allows for listening, of deans and priors for the sake of good discipline, of respect for the goods of the monastery, of excommunication for faults that do harm to the environment of seeking God, all of these point to an emphasis on creating the atmosphere in which blocks to seeking God are minimized, and encouragement for growth in holiness is maximized.

Learning Together

This brief encounter with the life of Saint Benedict and the monasticism that grew out of his experience is recounted here because it reveals another learning process, but one that resembles the process of learning that each one of us grew up in. We lived in an environment that either encouraged learning or discouraged it. My number one nephew learned to appreciate books at a very early age. He was read to from the earliest years and perceived the excitement of learning early on. And low and behold! He even learned to read books of his own choosing so that no one could accuse his parents of brainwashing him!

Learning can simply be rote, the memorization of facts, a recounting of events, an adding up of columns of numbers. But education has to be more than that. We do in fact live in a context that is independent of any one of us. We live with other people, and we learn to get along -- at least with those with whom we must get along if we would survive.

The wisdom of life is that which enables us and others to live together in recognition that we are in fact interdependent and that the wanton destruction of a part of this creation is a threat to all of that creation. This clearly involves a value system built not on the individualistic pursuit of profit for the few but recognizes the interconnectedness of our life systems and the dependence we all have on the other for the survival of the human species and the planet on which it exists.

An education that teaches us how to exploit isn't really worthy of the name education. Such a system is built on greed, not service, on selfishness, not mutuality. The world gives much evidence today that we have been well-educated in such a process of exploitation, and the world is not a very happy place for many people as a result.

This continues the previous principle. It is beautiful to watch a family that listens to one another, where the older children teach the younger and, at the same time, learn to listen to the signals the unspeaking give to the listening. Is there a learning process anywhere that isn't in some way interdependent? The wise teacher is the one who learns from the student who then learns from the teacher how to discover the truth that is revealed when people listen to each other.

We learned language by listening and imitating. But we didn't stop that at the age of five or so. At whatever age, we are continually learning from others, or, if we are not, we have become stodgy old sour heads that no one wants around.

At my home monastery we have **The Collegeville Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research**. Some years ago, I was part of what was called a consultation where a group of a dozen or more scholars came together to discuss "confessing faith in God today." One of the inviolable rules of discussion was that each person had to speak in the first person. This took the discussion out of the realm of theory only and placed it right square in the life of the speaker. It was by speaking and by listening that a learning process brought forth a deeper understanding and even toleration for varying viewpoints. It was an all-round good experience.