

In Praise of the Useless Life

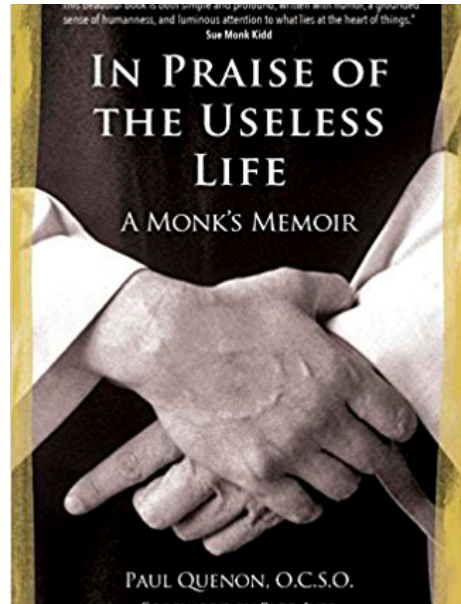
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Review by Dennis Daly

After living six decades in the Cistercian (Trappist) Monastery of Gethsemani, Paul Quenon has written a quiet, self-effacing journal of the heart, which periodically breaks out into syllabic dance and grammatical song. This memoir purports to portray the life of an ordinary man living in an unconventional community, a spiritual haven that attracts both simple penitents and intellectual paragons. However, a man, who keens at the death of trees, claims Emily Dickinson as his soul sister, writes exquisite poetry, and engages in a mysticism that he calls “the choreography of heaven” doesn’t strike me as ordinary at all.



Throughout this personal chronological Quenon weaves in scenes from the life of Thomas Merton, as well as reiterating much of Merton’s counter-cultural wisdom. It could not be otherwise. Early on Quenon had read Merton’s autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, and Merton’s stature as a modern-day monk had been one of the draws that convinced him to enter the monastery. Once there Merton became his novice master, adding layers of influence onto the young man. Other novices schooled with Quenon during Merton’s stint as novice master included a university valedictorian, a lawyer (presumably there for repentance), a missionary back from New Guinea, a psychologist, a later-in-life college president, a soon-to-be brain surgeon and Ernesto Cardenal, who was to emerge as an influential poet and controversial Sandinista revolutionary in Nicaragua.

Quenon knows his audience and relates many inside baseball vignettes about Merton. In one lightly humorous story the young Quenon appears at Merton’s door to ask him, “What is the meaning of Zen?” In answer Merton bops Quenon on the head with a book. When Quenon persists in questioning this expert in eastern religion and philosophy, Merton says, “There is a cherry tree outside the window,” and leaves it at that.

Mother Nature apparently took over Quenon’s education where Merton left off. She provides him with daily, twenty-four hour classrooms, stirs his enzymes, raises his energy, and generally nourishes his soul. Going out into the weather is not only part of his life but also a spirit-lifting ritual. “I am governed and made into something larger than myself,” says Quenon. “One morning appears as a Chinese painting,” he continues, “with cloaks of fog concealing here, partly there, revealing hills, trees, and fields. Another morn displays a brilliant sprawl of clarity, the color too good to be true, unbearably perfect, until the sun heightens and the sky

blanches in the midday heat.”

One of the chapter sections in Quenon’s book he entitles Eminent Trees I Have Known. Here he voices the affecting kinship he felt upon the demise of two linden trees, killed in order to make room for a new infirmary. He studies his own reaction objectively. “I watched from a distance as they were plowed over with a bulldozer, and the sight provoked my voice to a high, soft pitch,” he says. “Such feelings of kinship were a surprise to me; I had never made that sound before, yet it seemed the only decent thing to do at the moment.”

Quenon, not only sleeps under the stars most nights, but has molded his meditational life around locations with expansive views and open to the weather. Among these sites is the porch of Merton’s old hermitage, about a mile into the woods behind the abbey. Quenon is the caretaker of the hermitage and has escorted many renowned visitors there, including Nobel Prize laureates Seamus Heaney and Czeslaw Milosz. He often sits in a chair with a brass plate attached to the top that says, “Bench of Dreams.” It was affixed there by a man who had been assistant secretary general of the United Nations for forty years.

Monks have built-in models for their style of life. I’m thinking of the desert fathers, St. John of the Cross, St. Teresa of Avila, and St. Therese of Lisieux. Although familiar with the aforementioned, Quenon seems to prefer the poet Emily Dickinson as an exemplar of Trappist life and thought. He quotes many of her poetic lines including these,

*Growth of Man—like Growth of Nature,
Gravitates within.
Atmosphere, and sun endorse it—
But it stir—alone.*

*Each its difficult Ideal
Must achieve—Itself—
Through the solitary prowess
Of a silent life.*

My favorite chapter in Quenon’s memoir he entitles Battle of Wits with a Mockingbird. It’s pretty funny. As the monk tries to sleep outside on the porch of the monastery’s lumber shed, a mockingbird begins an unforgettable aria. At first Quenon tries to communicate with the bird like Native Americans were once wont to do, making an oracle out of the creature. Then he begins to yell at the bird. But the bird believes this is a show of positive enthusiasm. Finally, dead tired, the monk begins flapping his blanket, mimicking a bigger bird. This works—for a while. But the next night the bird is back, having figured out the blanket trick. And this epic battle goes on night after night with Quenon using multiple stratagems like setting up a plastic owl decoy to scare the bird or throwing water into the trees. Yet none of these techniques work. Each defeat of monk by mockingbird Quenon memorializes with a haiku, such as,

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*I wish talent star
with night variety shows
would go off the air.*

And this one,

*The Mocker, all night
Harasses the neighborhood
—Damn sociopath!*

Finally after moving to a new sleeping place the monk planned and carried out a sneak attack, violently shaking the bird's tree. This successfully startled the bird and he absented himself from the vicinity. Now, however, Quenon exhibits all the telltale signs of remorse. He clearly misses the clever show-off, and says so.

Quenon's literary window into the everyday life of Trappist monks is anything but useless. It frames the monastery, and, by extension, humanity as a vital buzzing hive of meaningful encounters, with its hooded denizens conjuring up perpetual moments of unique existence and creative imagination. Beware of this book if you've lost your sense of childish play, if you live a life without song or dance, or if you feel silly communing with trees. It could change you.