

## PRAISE FOR GOD'S PATIENT PURSUIT OF MY SOUL

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THIS BOOK WILL HELP MANY TO INCREASE THEIR CONFIDENCE IN GOD'S GREAT LOVE FOR US.

—**Father Thomas Keating, OSB**, founding member of Contemplative Outreach LTD, author, and a central figure in the initiation of the Centering Prayer movement



A MAGNIFICENT FETE OF GRACE AND CREATIVITY. The Lord surely is enabled to manifest through this brilliant new author most of the time, as K. G. Durckheim would say.

—**Pascaline Coff, OSB**, co-founder of Osage Monastery in Sand Springs, Oklahoma, and former secretary for the Monastic Interreligious Dialogue



A LIGHT OUT OF THE WILDERNESS FROM THESE DIZZY TIMES OF SO MANY PATHS, SPIRITUALITIES, AND TEACHERS. This is an amazing story of a Catholic woman, who married, raised a family near Chicago, and excelled in the billion-dollar direct selling industry. I was looking for wisdom from lay Catholic women, and I found it in this intelligent book, *God's Patient Pursuit of My Soul*. She's not only found her voice, but her vocation as a writer.

—**Meg Funk**, Benedictine nun and author of the Matter series (*Tools Matter, Thoughts Matter, Humility Matters, Discernment Matters*)



**AN INCREDIBLE READ... A LYRICAL, INTELLIGENT, SELF-EFFACING GORGEOUS WRITER. I LOVED IT SO MUCH.** The pacing is fabulous. Her voice is engaging and inclusive ... a truly talented writer with metaphoric aptitude ... language is full of imagery, depth, and perception. The writing is measured, lush and extremely readable ... A stand out in today's business memoirs ... She has broken the mold by creating a confluence of not only business success and spiritual depth but also a grasp of the language that hails her as a literary talent. This book is cutting edge. It WILL change lives! The images have already changed mine!

—**Suzanne Kingsbury**, editor, author of award-winning *The Summer Fletcher Greel Loved Me* and *The Gospel According to Gracey*



**I WAS MESMERIZED BY THE TALE IN *GOD'S PATIENT PURSUIT OF MY SOUL*.** Manion weaves her spirituality through every facet of her life with an exquisite writing style. She brings spirituality alive in a way that is seldom done in “religious” books. Even though this is her first book, I am confident it won't be her last. More, please....

—**Jerilyn Dufresne**, author of the Sam Darling mystery series



**IN *GOD'S PATIENT PURSUIT OF MY SOUL*, CHRIS MANION SHARES HER STRUGGLE TO GIVE HER FULL LOVE AND DEDICATION TO GOD, WHILE BEING A WIFE AND MOTHER, AND SUCCESSFUL ENTREPRENEUR.** It is an ambitious book of self-reflection and vigorous self-improvement. Manion has become an acclaimed leader and mentor in the direct selling field as well as a member of the Catholic laity, who practices contemplative and sometimes mystical prayer. Her vibrant personality and boundless energy come through on every page.

—**Elizabeth Jeep, Ph.D.**, teacher, speaker, catechist, and author of *Sweeter than Honey: Prayers for Catechists*; *Children's Daily Prayer*; and *Blessings and Prayers through the Year*



**A BEAUTIFUL BOOK. THIS ELEGANT AND AUTHENTIC MEMOIR OF A FAITH-FILLED WOMAN** shows how it is possible to be very successful and yet vulnerable enough to completely depend on the indwelling Spirit to enliven your soul day by day. Chris says, “Life is precious, and what we accomplish through our little successes adds little ripples that affect the rest of us. One ripple touches another, and soon clusters, families, whole communities are moved and touched and encouraged by our little successes.” Chris’s book is a ripple that encourages us to be committed and faithful to God, to be free and true, to be loved and to give love.

—**Gail Fitzpatrick-Hopler**, Executive Director of Contemplative Outreach, LTD



**A HEART AND SOUL PAGE TURNER BAPTIZED IN BLOOD, SWEAT, AND TEARS.** At the same time, she’s funny! As I devoured this big, beautiful memoir, I was challenged, enlightened, transformed. Oh, and did I mention, she’s funny?

—**Sarah Fishburn**, author and mixed media artist. [www.sarahfishburn.com](http://www.sarahfishburn.com)



**VERY MOVING! AN OUTSTANDING BUSINESS MEMOIR FROM A LEADER IN THE DIRECT SELLING PROFESSION UNAFRAID TO ACKNOWLEDGE HER EVER-DEEPENING RELATIONSHIP WITH THE DIVINE AND THE SOURCE OF HER GIFTS AND TALENTS.** Her sophisticated memoir walks us through her climb to the top of our industry’s field leadership with humor, twists, and wise insights. I loved her role reversal of recruiter/recruited, what caused her to realign her priorities, and the cliff hanger. From entrepreneur to literary talent, Chris Manion resonates with the DSWA’s mission of

personal and professional development by pointing out that the more deeply you commit to serving the Lord and His purpose, the more you are called upon to develop yourself to the fullest. I recommend it to all direct sellers.

—**Nicki Keohohou**, CEO and co-founder of the Direct Selling World Alliance - DSWA.org



**CHRIS MANION HAS CREATED A HANDBOOK, IN THE FORM OF A MEMOIR, ON HOW TO LET THE BEAUTY OF LIFE BE A FEAST FOR THE SOUL.** Through trial and triumph, she carefully examines the potential in each moment, and each time breaks through to something significant, instructive, and graceful. It is a joy to behold. This may not be what we expect from a corporate superstar, but it is what we get from her generosity of spirit, the result of which is real insight into living life in the light.

—**Marion Roach Smith**, author of *The Memoir Project, A Thoroughly Non-Standardized Text for Writing & Life*



**AN ARRESTING AND ABSORBING MEMOIR THAT TELLS THE DEEPLY PERSONAL STORY OF ONE WOMAN'S RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD.** It's also a how-to-succeed-in-business story, with the emphasis on both spiritual and economic growth. Chris Manion sifts through her memories, tracing the intertwined nature of her spiritual life and her career. A touching and beautiful testimony.

—**William McKeen**, author of *Outlaw Journalist* and *Mile Marker Zero*



FILLED WITH WISDOM, INSIGHT ... Not everyone will relate to Chris' perspectives on life, but readers will be exposed to a person who is resilient and creative and humorous. She's original and spunky."

—**Dennis E. Hensley, Ph.D.**, author of *The Power of Positive Productivity*



I HAD NEVER HEARD OF THE SPIRITUAL GIFT OF TEARS; however, I have experienced this gift. Sometimes when I am worshipping God through music, the Spirit of God will rain down on me, and I will weep tender tears. It is an emotional experience that Manion describes very well in her chapter "The Gift of Tears."

I was encouraged by Manion's chapter about Centering Prayer. Recently, I was introduced to meditating for twenty-minute periods of time. I'd always meditated for five minutes after a Christian yoga class, but twenty was a great extension for my patience. However, when reading about the author's experience with spending the first twenty minutes of her day with the Lord, I was encouraged to do so, too. Like Manion says, "It is like giving God the first fruits of your day."

—**Susan Neal**, author of *Scripture Yoga: 21 Bible Lessons for Christian Yoga Classes* and *Yoga for Beginners: 60 Basic Yoga Poses for Flexibility, Stress Release, and Inner Peace*



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GOD'S PATIENT  
PURSUIT

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OF MY SOUL



CHRIS MANION

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GOD'S PATIENT  
PURSUIT

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OF MY SOUL

THIS BOOK WILL HELP MANY TO INCREASE  
THEIR CONFIDENCE IN GOD'S GREAT LOVE FOR US.

—*FATHER THOMAS KEATING*



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*Dedicated to my better half.  
You live up to your name, Joe,  
always protecting, forgiving, supporting,  
providing, teaching by quiet example,  
and loving us in amazing ways.*





*O God, you have taught me from my youth,  
and I proclaim your wonders still.*

—Psalm 71:17



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# INTRODUCTION



SHAPING A LIFE, both the living of it and the telling of it, is an elusive creative process, somewhat like a pointillist painting. Up close, nothing seems clear. Only as one steps back enough from the painting does an image appear from the multitude of tiny brush strokes.

Once at the dinner table, my father asked my mother, who was an excellent cook, “Is this stuff supposed to have any flavor?” Being almost as obtuse as my beloved father, I didn’t realize how much shaping God had to do as He drew me close. All along, I thought I was the one pursuing Him.

He began shaping me in the early sixties when I found myself accepting Dad’s invitation to accompany him to daily Lenten Latin Masses in the wee hours before school. I was in third grade at St. Katherine of Siena School in Philadelphia. God pursued me through the hills of childhood in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and through public high school in Bloomington, Indiana, where my search began for a personal relationship with Jesus. Having been reared Catholic, I didn’t know such a relationship with the Founder of all intelligence<sup>1</sup> was possible. The idea that God lived way up in heaven and somehow inside us at the same time never connected with me. I chalked it up to “Mystery,”

the answer to many of my childhood questions. When I heard someone refer to Jesus as his best friend, I wondered, *How does that happen?*

God pursued me through college, several companies, marriage, and motherhood. I used to think I could get away with some behaviors, that God couldn't always see what I was doing, that He had to be busy with others some of the time. The tides turned when I realized He saw into every room and closet, as well as my every thought.

For years I read books on spirituality, mostly by saints or members of cloistered religious orders. My soul longed to connect with them. Their words seemed to separate my roles as a daughter of God, corporate executive, working mom, and wife like oil from vinegar.

I developed a multi-million dollar sales team in a home-based direct selling business. My flexible work schedule as an entrepreneur provided pockets of time to reduce the internal obstacles on my spiritual journey, just as my Irish ancestors cleared stones from their fields, piling them into uneven walls throughout their land.

Well into my thirties, I clung to the notion that God lived above us in His heaven listening to our prayers as they floated up to Him. It took a while to get Jesus' "as" concept into my heart: work *as* prayer, prayer *as* work. Love one another *as* I have loved you. Forgive us our trespasses *as* we forgive others.

In 1995, God guided me to a vibrant online contemplative lay community, perhaps the first of its kind affiliated with no one but Him. The founder of that community posed a question one day: "What does it mean for you to be a contemplative in contemporary society?" The question haunted me and planted the seed for this book. Until then, I'd been happily going along as a nice little Catholic girl active in her faith. The question made me think about how I lived out my faith, how intentionally my actions followed my beliefs, and if I was a contemplative, how I felt about that. Through this one question, God drew me into depths I knew nothing about. I still know nothing except the knowledge I receive from His grace. I often think I know stuff, but there's a chasm between what I think and what I know.

A year or two before his death in 2005, I spoke to author and abbot Dom Basil Pennington, OSCO, about how my work and spiritual journey felt like two separate paths. He helped me see that the tables

where I worked were all places that share the bread of life. No division exists between them. All are one. My sense of separation was false. Why was this concept so hard to integrate? Because “Mystery cannot be penetrated from without,”<sup>2</sup> wrote Monsignor Romano Guardini, a little-known German philosopher-priest often cited by Pope Francis.

Dom Basil helped me realize that the private life of a working contemplative should not be secret. It takes courage to share, especially when the journey includes mystical experiences. I felt like Alice in Wonderland in a strange land experiencing mysterious occurrences, not knowing what to do or how to act. Out of place and uncomfortable at times, I also felt incredible peace and overwhelming love, none of which I could discuss. I pictured people rolling their eyes if I told them about God talking to me.

My experiences—God’s startling appearance in response to my reaching out to Him—seemed like descriptions from books of saints, not a laywoman with a honky laugh raising a family and trying to make lots of money. Like others before me, I sensed Someone wanted me to write the experiences down. If I did, perhaps I could help others feel less alienated as they experienced similar God-moments. Perhaps I could find others who would talk as if this was something God does with all of us.

God firmly but subtly brought the Johannine passage before me: “Feed my sheep.” Years earlier my spiritual director had asked me to ponder this passage. I decided I’d better follow the Boss’s advice. As God told St. Maria Faustina shortly before her death, it is painful to Him when we reject sharing our bread. And so as you read this now, I know He is pleased since it is His fingers that have kneaded His yeast into me. I’m still a stubborn Irish loaf, but less resistant now that the yeast has done its work. When God blesses, breaks, and encourages us to share ourselves like the little boy’s bread in the loaves and fishes Gospel story, is there not more at the end than there was at the beginning?

*This is too personal*, I often thought as I chose what to share of my journey thus far.

“Share it anyway,” came the reply.

I trembled as I lived the words of the famous hymn “Trust and Obey” by John H. Sammis:

When we walk with the Lord in the light of His Word,  
What a glory He sheds on our way!  
While we do His good will, He abides with us still,  
And with all who will trust and obey.

Refrain:

Trust and obey, for there's no other way  
To be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.

## CHAPTER 1

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# THE FOREST OF PEACE



*The desire for God leads to the search for God  
and hence to love of God.*

—Ilia Delio

**2004**

HE KEPT BREAKING into my life. It's not that I didn't ask for it, I know. Every time it happened, I took days to recover. I didn't know how to integrate it. Too often, I did not even recognize it. He changed all that one mild, summer day.

"You should go to Osage and meet Sister Pascaline," my spiritual director urged me.

"Who is she?" I asked.

"She is an amma, one of the wise ones like the desert fathers, a holy woman whom I'd like you to meet. She can guide you, but go soon. She is already very old."

I Googled Sister Pascaline Coff and found her at Osage Monastery in Oklahoma. She had been the former Secretary of the international organization MID, Monastic Interreligious Dialog, preceding Sister Meg Funk, whom I'd meet later. Sister Pascaline had participated in

the Gethsemane Encounter during the early, heady times with the Dalai Lama and Trappist monk Thomas Merton, both good friends who attended with other leaders of worldwide religious communities, including Buddhists, Sufis, and Cistercians. Sister Pascaline, the prioress of her community, lived with five other Benedictine nuns. She offered spiritual direction to individuals making retreats in her monastery.

“We need to be open and eager to encounter the Divine in everything, in everyone,” she wrote. I couldn’t agree more. As I read her bio online, I glossed over references to her studying at Father Bede Griffiths’ ashram in India and being his close friend. She founded her monastery to implement Dom Bede’s ashram life and interreligious dialogue. I didn’t know anything about ashrams or Bede Griffiths, although I did begin reading one of his books to learn more about him. I went to meet Sister Pascaline solely on the counsel of my spiritual director, Mercedes Scopetta, an amma herself and recipient of an award from Rome for her work among Hispanics in her archdiocese.

I would soon discover Sister Pascaline’s love for the prophet Isaiah. She wrote: “Today if you hear the Voice, harden not your hearts,’ but recognize, love, praise, and adore the divine Heart who calls to us through the prophet Isaiah.”

*You are my witnesses . . .  
You are precious in my sight, and I love you,  
My servants whom I have chosen  
To know and believe in Me  
And to understand that it is I.*

—Isaiah 43:10

I booked a week’s retreat and, in blind faith, found a flight to meet her. I was in my mid-forties, my husband worked from home then, and my children were in their teens. Leaving my family for a week would not be a hardship. Besides, I liked the example it set for taking the time to prioritize one’s relationship with God.

“There’s no need to rent a car, Chris,” my spiritual director advised. “They have a hospitality ministry, the Benedictines. They’ll meet you at the airport. Just tell them your flight number and arrival time.”

Sure enough, when I walked out from baggage to the sidewalk outside the airport, an elderly nun in a modest habit without a headpiece stood near the door looking for me. She greeted me and walked me to a waiting car where another white-haired nun sat at the wheel. I stored my suitcase in the trunk.

“Welcome!” the driver said as I closed the car door.

“Thank you!” I smiled self-consciously, not knowing what to expect. I put on my seat belt.

“Tell us about yourself,” said the driver as we drove back to their monastery. I gave a short answer and then shared how I looked forward to meeting Sister Pascaline.

“I’m Sister Pascaline,” said the driver.

My eyebrows lifted. I blinked a few times. I hadn’t paid much attention to this nun—barely tall enough to see over the steering wheel—but that was about to change. I looked at her more carefully. She appeared quiet and soft-spoken, revealing little energy. It never occurred to me the Prioress herself would be the one driving out to the airport to pick me up.

At that moment, in grace-filled insight, I realized it hadn’t occurred to me that The Divine One had been the driver of my life either. I hadn’t paid much attention to the Omniscient Driver up until that moment. I had been happy to move along in my life, never really noticing Who got me there, thinking I’d done most of the work myself. I’d been more interested in the journey itself until then, less aware of the One guiding my way.

As we left the paved road, a sign announced “The Forest of Peace.” Dirt and gravel ricocheted off the undercarriage of the car. After parking beneath the canopy of aged trees, Sister Pascaline gave me a brief tour of the monastery, ending at my cabin in the woods. The little house consisted of a bedroom and bathroom. Two windows looked out into thick woods, and a wooden desk and chair waited timelessly beside the single bed tucked into the corner. Across from the desk stood a dresser bearing an icon of the Blessed Mother with Jesus encircled in light over her heart. The “closet” of three wall hooks quietly welcomed me to minimal simplicity. Cleaning supplies waited below the bathroom sink.

“Leave the bathroom wiped down upon departure, with the bed stripped,” Sister Pascaline instructed. Compliance cemented itself when

I saw the tiniest of nuns and the oldest, probably in her late-eighties, heading with a bucket to clean one of the retreat homes.

An ascetic front porch with a chair facing the ranch style monastery completed the amenities. Similar houses for the nuns knelt behind the monastery. Silence descended from the thick trees shading this Forest of Peace. I let it touch me. My spirit slipped into it as one eases into a warm bath.

“Make yourself at home. Let us know if you need anything, anything at all,” said Sister Pascaline as she turned and walked to the monastery.

*The psalmist tells us to “Be still and know that I am God.” This quieting down and being still is the role of meditation (what we call contemplation in the West). And this is where the Eastern religious traditions have so much to share with us.*

—Pascaline Coff

The stillness settled around me like a cat snuggling in for a nap. I sat on the bed and studied the schedule for prayer times and meals. The structure of the day imitated that of other retreats I'd attended. I had a little more than an hour before 4:30-afternoon prayers, so I unpacked and walked along one of the paths. I allowed the decompression from the outside world to begin, consciously trying to slow my pace, although I knew it would occur naturally as I immersed myself in the gentle rhythm of the sisters' prayer life.

The five-minute warning bell, rung at each prayer time, invited me to join the community in the chapel. Crunching old leaves underfoot, I walked beneath outstretched branches to the monastery and entered the front door. To my immediate left a stationary bicycle sat tucked into a hallway. It would hum each morning as one of the sisters spun its wheels. In the kitchen, a long counter stretched around the sink and cabinets. An oversized dining table yawned at windows facing the forest. Picnic tables scattered themselves like tossed jacks beyond the window. The room for viewing the nightly news snuggled itself next to a small, cozy library where audio tapes and books nestled to the right of the chapel.

Abandoned shoes bowed before the chapel entrance, pointing to their owners' location. An involuntary gasp escaped during my tour

when Sister Pascaline opened the chapel doors. The room's magnificence rooted itself in the imagery of nature. A floor-to-ceiling wall of windows welcomed light through the filter of the forest. My eyes followed the rays of sunshine into a sunken prayer circle in the center of the chapel. Full of colorful floor pillows, the pit reflected the Sundance Circle of American Indians. Above the pit, or Sundance Circle, was a large cosmic wheel with the eight-fold Buddhist noble paths in its wooden spokes: right view, right thought, right speech, right behavior, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. I knew nothing at the time of these noble paths. What came to mind from the circle was Revelation 22:13: "*I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.*"

To the right stood a small organ and additional seating for those unable to sit on the floor. To the left, a lit candle—signifying Christ's presence in the tabernacle—hung from intricately woven tree branches suspended from the ceiling. The prayer circle reclaimed my attention. *What a welcome alternative to the traditional architecture of churches and cathedrals*, I thought.

The emphasis on the circle resonated within me, reminding me of unending love; of the world without end in the Glory Be to God prayer; of our all-knowing and all-abiding God Who loves all of His creation. The circle contained the symbol of the wedding ring bringing to mind how the nuns were brides of Christ. Some of my favorite words of Jesus arose: "May they be one, Father, just as You are in Me and I in You." The circle had two entrances. All could be seen from within and without. For liturgies, the priest descends into it, sits on a low twig stool, and uses a small wooden table for an altar.

The descent into the prayer circle felt like a lowering into the arms of my Lord, like walking into the ocean, into waters that refresh and invigorate, envelope and buoy. I nestled myself on a pillow much the way I'd done when, as an insecure teen, I had hidden away in the rafters above the theater at University High School in Bloomington, Indiana. Eager to open myself to the half hour of silent meditation, I watched the five nuns settle down, observing their rituals as the sun grew sleepy.

When the twenty minutes of silent prayer time ended, we quietly filed out of the chapel. A few of the nuns moved to the kitchen; the

rest sat to watch the evening news. As soon as the news program took a commercial break, one sister lifted the remote control and immediately muted the television, a practice my husband and I have happily adopted ever since. I saw magazines or newspapers rise almost in unison from each of the nuns' laps. They either read or conversed about a news story, never looking at the television screen while the commercials played. When the news returned, they lowered their magazines and newspapers to their laps and looked back up. They turned the TV off when the news ended, and everyone immediately rose to their dinner duties. I appreciated the care they took to limit what entered their minds as well as their light touch on the world and local news. "Consider carefully what you hear," said Jesus (Mark 4:24). They certainly did.

At dinner someone introduced me and one other new retreatant. We each received a unique napkin ring to identify our dinner napkin for the rest of the week. After the meal all were expected to chip in cleaning up the kitchen and washing the dishes. While we waited for the water to turn hot, a nun placed empty, plastic milk cartons under the spigot to catch the cool water. They used it for watering house plants and herbs. Everything was conserved, respected, and recycled. Not long after dark, most retired early. The next prayer time was pre-dawn, the best time of the day for prayer, with its unique, pure energies.

Sister Pascaline set an appointment each day for a half hour of directed spiritual guidance. It was up to me to determine the rest of my schedule. The trails of the property beckoned. I looked forward to using the map from my room to explore them.

*Let Thought Become Your Beautiful Lover<sup>3</sup>*

*Let thought become the beautiful Woman.  
Cultivate your mind and heart to that depth  
That it can give you everything  
A warm body can.  
Why just keep making love with God's child –  
Form  
When the Friend Himself is standing*

*Before us  
 So open-armed?  
 My dear,  
 Let prayer become your beautiful Lover  
 And become free,  
 Become free of this whole world  
 Like Hafiz.*

—Hafiz

To follow the daily schedule of prayer and Eucharist each day meant rising in the pre-dawn dark to walk with my flashlight along the dirt path under the forest canopy to the little monastery. I removed my shoes outside the chapel door and added them to those huddled closely together like monks bent deep in prayer. Each prayer session began with the same chant.

*Salutations to the Word  
 Present in the earth,  
 The heavens, and that which is beyond.  
 May I meditate on your glorious Wisdom  
 O Divine Giver of life.  
 May You illuminate our prayer  
 And give us peace.*

In low, early-morning gravelly voices, the sisters chanted the beautiful Hindu Gayatri Mantra chant that Father Bede had given them, adapted from his ashram in India. Silence followed in the holy darkness, leading us gently into contemplative prayer and sometimes, for passing moments, into divine union with God.

Ding! A tiny resonating chime announced the end of prayer time as abruptly as a proud rooster in the barnyard calling all to a new day of work and activity. We moved our stiff limbs and unlocked our crossed legs. It took several moments to get ourselves into a standing position once again, and not just because we weren't thirty-year-olds anymore. Meditation draws the body's metabolism to a deeper, slower-paced

level of activity. Slowly, very slowly, meta-spiritual awareness shifted to meta-cognitive awareness. A deep bow of reverence toward the tabernacle concluded our prayer time, and we silently padded out of the chapel in sock feet to our waiting shoes.

Breakfast was on our own and in silence. Each person moved mindfully toward coffee or hot water, cereal or fruit and chose a place apart to eat quietly and continue praying, reading, or gazing out through a window to dawn's awakening. I followed suit. Sister Pascaline moved to the audio listening room each day and sat with black headphones over her white hair as she ate her breakfast. And so each day began.

Most people experience the relaxing effects of a vacation by the third or fourth day as their bodies unwind, releasing the tight, bulldog grip on the tension necessary to manage the frenetic pace at which we live and move. So it is on a retreat as well, although I think the full immersion into the slow-paced quiet of most monasteries accelerates the decompression process. Following the structure of the monastery's day, I spent my afternoon divided between reading, journal writing, and walking different paths through the deep woods of the Forest of Peace. If one rose early enough on most mornings, a small number of deer could be observed peacefully grazing among the trees. They were deeper in the woods during my afternoon walks, but plenty of other creatures delighted my senses. When I fell asleep at night, the forest's animal sounds intrigued me. I pushed aside fear when an unusual sound occurred, wondering instead what animal had made it. I reassured myself I was as safe as the diminutive, yet sturdy nuns who lived there all year long.

*Contemplative prayer is God's gift, wholly gratuitous.*

*No one can earn it.*

—The Cloud of Unknowing

Each day, I looked forward to my directed interview with Sister Pascaline, who inquired about my journey with God and shared her amma wisdom to guide me deeper into my relationship with Him. She asked me about my recent dreams. I had nothing to share with her.

"I rarely remember my dreams," I told her.

“Pay attention to them,” she instructed me, “for God often speaks to us there, and see if you can remember them to tell me next time.”

“Okay,” I said, shrugging, none too certain about what occurs once I close my eyes at night but hoping not to displease her the next day if I had nothing to report.

*You called, you shouted, you broke through my deafness, you flared, blazed, and banished my blindness, you lavished your fragrance, and I gasped.*

—St. Augustine

The next morning, I was surprised to remember one of my dreams from the night before. I had dreamt that a tall man offered me a piggyback ride. We stood in a wide, grassy field. I remember trusting him easily, climbing on his back. He smelled wonderful and carried me effortlessly, so I never worried about being too heavy for him. A warm bubble of comforting protection seemed to surround us. An easy, natural air of acceptance and affection flowed back and forth between us, although I wasn't sure who he was.

In my dream he jostled me around the field on his back and made me laugh. I felt like a little kid having fun again. My husband and son appeared in the distance and, seeing them, he turned sideways slightly, as if to show them he had me on his back and everything was okay. He wanted them to see me happy and having fun. I remember having mixed emotions, for I loved my husband and son with all my heart, yet, I clung to this man's back with no desire to let go, enjoying the closeness of my face near his neck as he playfully bounced me in a light jog. He delighted in making me smile and giggle. I felt drawn to him in an extraordinary way and looked over my shoulder at my husband as we turned away, hoping he'd somehow understand and not feel jealous.

How could I be so attracted to this stranger when I loved my husband so deeply? I couldn't dwell on this perplexity long. The piggyback ride jostled me into physical awareness with new jiggles and bounces. I tightened my grip and buried my face in the crook of his neck, inhaling the scent of a primal connection. I closed my eyes. Breathing in his scent reminded me of opening the door after traveling and smelling

the familiar fragrance that signaled: Home at last. You're safe. You can relax. Let down your guard. Rest.

I described my dream to Sister Pascaline at our meeting later that morning. She listened and asked a few clarifying questions. Although she seemed not to realize the identity of the tall stranger, in my awe at her wisdom, I assumed she knew. Upon awakening I had drawn my conclusion. "To know and believe in Me and to understand that it is I" Isaiah 43:10.

"He's Jesus," I told her. "I don't know how I know, I just do." I couldn't remember His face once I'd realized who He was, because, in most of the dream, my perspective viewed Him from His back. How handsome He had seemed!

"You must celebrate," Sister Pascaline suggested as she helped me understand this dream as a sign of a new depth in my relationship with Jesus, a new level of playful friendship and intimacy. Not fully grasping the dream's significance, I lit some incense and danced before the icon of Mary and Jesus on my dresser, feeling a little silly. Years later, Celtic poet, speaker, and priest John O'Donohue helped me understand this celebration directive from Sister Pascaline.

"There's something very holy about real celebration," said Fr. John O'Donohue. "I often think real celebration alters things at a profound level. Real celebration is not the banal, garish, self-gratifying shouting and self-congratulation that goes on. Real celebration is about the lyrical dance of joy at the center of the human heart. And when you celebrate in that way, then you are adding to the magical light of the universe."<sup>4</sup>

I allowed the happiness and joy from the piggyback ride to fall afresh upon me. I accepted Sister Pascaline's statement that this was an important moment in my relationship with Jesus, although it didn't feel all that special. It seemed natural. Stilling. Awe surrounded it like the hush of fog.

*Where and when God finds you ready, he must act and overflow into you, just as when the air is clear and pure, the sun must overflow into it and cannot refrain from doing that.*

—Meister Eckhart

Although I wanted it, it didn't seem possible that I could attain the inner peace of a still pond, an image I had held before me for years in haphazard attempts at serenity. It seemed unattainable for a drama queen, Type A personality full of vim and vigor and high levels of stress. An enthusiastic bundle of energy could not be melted into a pool of peaceful tranquility, at least not for very long, could she? I saw myself more like a Jack-in-the-Box, capable of making pretty music and luring others into thinking I was relaxed and then, Bang! Surprise! Ha! I'm baaa-ack! Wiggle-wiggle, goofy smile! Ga-boing! Ga-boing!