

Monastic Scribe XXX: July 1, 2022

Imagine That

Have you ever heard the saying, “Never give a sword to a man who can’t dance!”? I tend to think it is a Celtic adage but it also could be African in origin. What it says to me is that a warrior who can’t also read, sing, dance and tell stories will be a loose cannon. In Celtic times tribes would war on each other but only from Spring to Fall. They would settle down for the winter, gather around a fire and tell stories. I am always glad to see a photo of soldiers reading in their spare time.

This all points out how important is the imagination. The scientific and technological advances in recent centuries have influenced how we think and use our minds. Many have become passive spectators of television, the social media, computers in all forms. My older brother used to call himself a dinosaur when it came to all these. I am not like that. I love writing on a computer and using its many features. I have an iPad to keep up with many events. But I love to read. Google can unearth many facts in a matter of seconds. But attaining wisdom requires thinking, reflecting, analyzing, learning from experience and silence.

Our society is in jeopardy as it behaves more like robots. The liberal arts are dying in colleges. History, literature which included having a religious tradition have always stimulated the thinking that is needed in a democracy. Young people now are attracted to jobs that are involved with computers. All well and good. But not enough for mature adulthood. The arts, music, a good novel, all feed the imagination.

Of course, two more things must be added to all these. First, there is a need to be silent with a time to digest the thoughts and experiences of a day. Silence and solitude allow all the external stimuli to settle in our psyche. The second addition to reading and the arts is nature. We need to get out and see and listen to nature. How irked do I get when, on a walk in a park and I hear someone on a phone five hundred yards away who may not even be visible yet? I often say something to them as they pass by yelling into their phone. But, usually, they don’t even see me.

The use of imagination is particularly needed when we read the Bible.

Monastic Scribe XXX: July 1, 2022

An appreciation of metaphors, story, poetry, myth, is all part of the books of scripture which are written in many different forms. We who have been formed by science that stresses truth as only found in external, provable evidence, tend to have undeveloped right brains.

The post-Reformation doctrine of biblical inerrancy has done a lot of damage. To believe there are no factual errors in the Bible is to miss the message. To believe for instance, that the siege of Jericho in the Book of Joshua truly was aided by the sun standing still, opens us to ridicule, and justly so. Literalism and fundamentalism were never historically part of praying and meditation on the Bible. The reconciliation of science and faith is an important development in our own times. In fact, they are mutually helpful to us in discerning the truth. Myth and story also have much to teach us but not in a literal way.

The Catholic imagination indulges in ritual, art, music, color. Here in New England our Puritan forbears have not been helpful to us in grasping that which is beneath and beyond the external world. Life is sanctified by a rhythm of feast and fasting. The year is sanctified by seasons that echo the life of Christ. So much of this has been lost in our secularized environment. I tend to think that the future of the Catholic Church in America will benefit from the Black and Latino churches who, through pain and deprivation, have a much richer tradition of prayer and worship than many staid, white Christians.

Andrew Greely, a sociologist and priest, turned to writing novels as he felt that was the best medium to teach theology. Not many of us are up to that. But what all can do is enrich our imaginations. Read more novels. Attend plays, movies, dramas. Listen to music. Dance and get the body involved. All of this is the life of the spirit which nourishes our Life of the Spirit. Active participation in life, in ritual, in worship, in all the arts is good for the soul. The soul is the “juicy” aspect of our being. Is there anything else that you do to keep the soul alive? I can be contacted at: joycet@glastonburyabbey.org

Fr. Timothy Joyce, OSB, STL

Please note that I do not speak on behalf of Glastonbury Abbey, the Archdiocese of Boston or the Catholic Church, though I hope my faith is in harmony with all these. Any error in judgment should be credited to me and not anyone else.