

What I Have I Give You

Brother Philip

*Religion does not necessarily pry us open...
Religion can be the ultimately closed system,
the safe I lock myself in.
[But] quite to the contrary,
Christian prayer pries us open.
The words of prayer put God and the neighbor
into our mouths, and it is hoped, into our hearts.*

GAIL RAMSHAW ⁱ

*Then Peter said,
“I have no silver or gold,
but what I have I give you.
In the name of Jesus of Nazareth,
God’s anointed one,
stand up and walk.”*

ACTS 3: 6

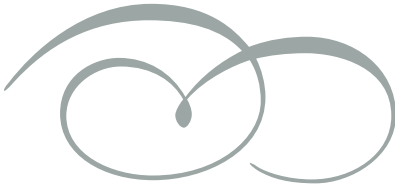
Reading the *Sayings* and *Lives* of the mothers and fathers of the desert, or listening to them proclaimed in our community prayer, I find myself drawn back to them again and again. Often enigmatic, sometimes perplexing, they are nevertheless a well of wisdom in a shallow, thirsting world. There are no frills to soften their message; no flood of words to drown the testimony of lives faithfully lived. These men and women—our earliest monastic forebears—were profoundly aware of the fragility and fallibility of humanity (theirs and ours). This awareness did not make them pessimistic, but gave birth to a compassion towards their neighbor that healed and set free. They were in no way super-human. Ordinary men and women, they so steeped themselves in self-emptying and silence before the mystery of God, that the living core of the Gospel made its home in their bodies. These fathers and mothers of the desert were known, not only for their few words, but for their unselfconscious deeds of mercy for others, which proclaimed the good news of God’s love more powerfully than any speech. Having neither silver nor gold, they gave what was truly theirs to give.

What lures me to these forebears are the ways in which they incarnate the Gospel's call "to love as God loves" in all its unavoidable simplicity—a call that says, "You too are empowered to do this!" For such graced human lives we can only be grateful.

The *Sayings* also point me to the *present*.

Early this year, on February 19, I underwent surgery to fuse my right ankle, after aggressive arthritis had done its work. I tried to prepare myself prior to the surgery, so that I might be open to the challenges and changes that lay ahead, and responsive to God's Gifting deep in every moment. My long month in the hospital and in rehab was marked by the presence of my brothers—a loving communion stronger than time and distance. I learned that, during my time away, the brothers had been working hard to make the house more "user-friendly" for all of us: a new ramp leading to the chapel, and the beginning of the construction of ramping linking the various floors of the monastery.

So many of our friends, too, expressed their care and support. To each and all of you, I am deeply thankful for your kindness.



I have been surrounded and supported by the generosity and love of each and every brother. Returning home to the Priory on March 19, I was unable to put any weight on the affected ankle for another five weeks. How would I get to the shower each morning? How could I navigate the stairs leading from one level of the monastery to another? Faithfully, morning by morning, brothers accompanied me down the long corridor to the shower, and back. As for the stairs, day by day

and as often as necessary, four brothers lifted my wheel-chair up and down the stairs. Having neither silver nor gold, they offered me the very heart of who they are. And in so doing, they became my legs, my wings!

These experiences became for me a profound sacrament of our *life together*. What does it mean that we—all frail and fallible human beings—"carry" one another in the good times and in the difficult, with faithfulness and without fanfare? As Saint Benedict would have wanted, it is our word of promise, given in our monastic profession, made flesh in our bodies—by the

grace of God's faithfulness. It is the daily *doing* of the Gospel, at the same time more humble and more potent than all our spoken words. And in the end, this mutual carrying is a journey that we have undertaken together.

Someone asked me, after I returned home, if I felt "important", given all this care. No, I responded, I feel *loved*. Words cannot adequately

express the deep, deep love and gratitude I feel toward my brothers. For these graced, very human brothers I can only give thanks. "You yourselves are a letter, written in [my] heart, that everyone can read and understand; and it is plain that you are a letter from Christ, entrusted to [my] care, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God; not on stone tablets, but on the tablets of human hearts" (II Cor. 3: 1—3). But my gratitude is also a challenge *to me*: to give, not silver or gold, but what is deeply mine to give—to give my strength to carry my brothers. ☒

Seeds of Newness

**WHY, WHEN GOD'S WORLD is so big,
do you fall asleep in a prison—
of all places?**

RUMI
Persian poet, mystic, theologian,
1207-1273

¹ Gail Ramshaw, "Pried Open by Prayer," in *Liturgy and the Moral Self*, E. Byron Anderson and Bruce Morrill, SJ, editors (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1998), 169

