



The Meteora region in the Peneas Valley, central Greece, is home to more than 20 Eastern Orthodox monasteries built on remote clifftops. The Aghia Trias (Holy Trinity), built in the 13th century is one of the most inaccessible and one of only four of which still house religious communities. JELLE VAN DER WOLF/GETTY IMAGES

Pico Iyer's latest book is [Aflame: Learning from Silence](#).

To get to the Monastery of Christ in the Desert, just past Georgia O'Keefe's Ghost Ranch in northern New Mexico, you have to bump for 13 miles on barely paved tracks. Signs warn of "FALLING ROCKS" and "FLASH FLOODS" and the [update](#) posted by the guestmaster monk online alerts visitors each day to treacherous road conditions. "All-wheel drive vehicles are advised," it recently read. "Also, there are cattle roaming in the canyon. They often stand in the road, especially at night." This information is a little more helpful than the "news" section of one website I found for the monasteries on Mount Athos, which had not been updated in almost five years.

At the end of the road, after edging along a one-lane path four stories above the surging Chama River, you come upon a cluster of cabins and a chapel smack up against a 600-foot-high sandstone cliff.



The Monastery of Christ in the Desert. (October 1995) NATASHA LANE/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

The Benedictine monks tend sheep, but it was a huge black cow that stared me down as, on arrival last July, I walked the Stations of the Cross through the desert to the chapel. The silence, as in all such places, was intense, enveloping, a presence, really – of birdsong, leaves shivering in the wind, everything I can't hear when I'm too much in my head.

The next day, I walked across the brush to the elegant and well-stocked bookstore, where a monk who'd been in residence for 42 years sat alone on a chair, patiently making rosettes out of discarded pieces of silk from saris. There were only 17 monks living here now, Brother Andre said, bent over his labour and threading purple strands into blue. But that was better than when there were three times as many. At that time, he explained, looking up, "there was a lot of coming and going" and men ill-suited to the life were a distraction for those more deeply committed.

"Young people today aren't so ready to commit," continued Andre, frowning over his many-coloured creation and clearly in no hurry at all. When Benedict set up his monastic Rule, "there was no dispensation of vows; you couldn't

leave.” Now every kind of commitment – to a partner, a job, a monastery – seems imperilled in our age of fast-shrinking attention spans.

“Our life isn’t always easy,” he acknowledged, smiling at me. “But then whose is? Marriage is very nice, but it’s not always easy.” I thought of how the Dalai Lama, when asked how he remains so cheerful and calm in the midst of an incomparably difficult life, jokes that he has no wife or kids to worry about.

The absolute confidence and serenity of the old monk are two of the reasons why I keep returning to monastic institutions. Over more than three decades, I’ve stayed in monasteries in Japan, in Western Australia, in southern England and in California. Indeed, I’ve made more than 100 solitary retreats just in the New Camaldoli Benedictine hermitage in Big Sur, Calif. – sometimes even staying with the monks in their enclosure.

I never come away from the place anything other than refreshed, clarified and full of joy; though I’m not a Christian, the monks open their hearts and doors to me without hesitation, faithful to St. Benedict’s call to hospitality. At the same time, I’m a perfect example of what I increasingly worry about; I’m happy to stay for a few days, offering the small voluntary donation the monastery suggests, but I’ve made no formal commitment to a place that has changed my life. Over the 33 years I’ve been staying there, I’ve seen the number of oblates – lay people who vow to honour the congregation’s principles as much as they can in everyday life – surge from 700 to 800; in that same time, the number of full-time monks has shrunk to almost single digits.

We’re surrounded, of course, by ever more New Age sanctuaries, retreat centres and yoga-inflected spas, yet what will be lost, I often wonder, if formal monasteries and convents based on lifelong commitments close down? Unlike new spiritual centres, they are not as a rule centred around a single teacher, a doctrine every guest is encouraged to follow, or some theory of existence discovered five years ago; they’re tested millennia-old establishments that don’t depend on one fallible human or yesterday’s revelations. After the wise and kind Trappist Father Thomas Keating died, in 2018, his Snowmass monastery in Colorado had to close its doors. The Church may end up US\$150-million richer once the [sale](#) of the property is complete, but all of us who look to such centres for guidance and inspiration will end up many times poorer.

Like the untroubled monk I met in the New Mexico desert, many monastics are faithful enough not to express anxieties. More than most, their life is based on

quality, not quantity. They know that the truth they follow never gets old and they've based their lives on the notion that they can best help the world by quietly going about their practice. They're keenly aware that for centuries numbers have risen and fallen like the tides. After the shock of the Second World War, Thomas Merton's *Seven Storey Mountain* brought a flood of young men into monasteries across the globe; now, in the age of Facebook and CNN, we find it less easy to submit to the obedience and discipline a life of contemplation entails.

Perhaps, if various monasteries close now, some ageless longing will bring them back into life in time; the fury and acceleration of the modern world leave many of us more eager than ever to clear our heads, live at a human pace and remember what we love. But a monastery like New Camaldoli needs \$3,000 a day just to keep its small community going; when one of the elderly monks falls ill, he often has to be helicoptered to the nearest hospital, two and a half hours away by car. Seven of the last eight years, the hermitage has been cut off entirely from the world for months on end by winter storms, wildfires or COVID; the price of living in the wilderness is that monks are at the mercy of what lawyers refer to as "acts of God."

None of the brothers wishes to be elected prior because the head of their community has to spend most of his time dealing with lawyers, construction workers and feuding workers. And none of this is easy on ever more elderly men and women who have been living in their cloisters for half a century. When I visit the Vedanta convent in Santa Barbara – where I used to hear Christopher Isherwood give talks, encircled by nuns – I see only four full-time members, two of them over the age of 75.

Thus supply is shrinking even as short-term demand is surging. "There perhaps has never been a time in history when 'the world is so much with us,'" wrote Father Aelred Wall, one of the three monks who founded Christ in the Desert in 1964. He wrote those words in 1970, long before most of us had heard of the Internet and generations before smartphones cut up our lives. These days we're in such a hurry, we can't see how much of a hurry we're in. As the mystically minded Simone Weil wrote, decades ago, the danger is not that there is no bread, but that we have convinced ourselves we're not hungry.

Yet for me the blessings of these hospitals for the soul go far beyond digital detox. Stepping into the active stillness that I find in every monastery and convent – and in every order – releases me from my chattering thoughts and tiny

plans and invites me into a far wider landscape. I wake up to the beauty of the light on the sea, the rabbit in the grass, the overflow of stars. I recall the people I love and why I love them. I'm brought back to a truth and self I too often lose in the tumult of the everyday, and moved to rethink what I really understand by progress or success.

Most of all I find joy, which is, the monks explain, the happiness that isn't dependent on circumstance. Every time I make the drive into silence I feel guilty to be leaving my aging mother behind, along with my bosses' e-mails and my friend with a birthday-party; every time I arrive, I'm reminded that it's only by stepping away from the rush that I can gather the freshness, the energy and the hope that are the best thing I can offer to my mother and my friends. When reality makes a house-call – my father suddenly went into the hospital and died, my 13 year-old daughter was diagnosed with cancer – it's only the time I've spent in silence that gives me the strength I need as I step into the ICU.

Monks are by their nature self-effacing and down-to-earth; my friend Brother Paul Quenon, who has lived for more than 60 years at Gethsemani monastery in Kentucky, where his novice master was Thomas Merton, entitled his first book *In Praise of the Useless Life*. Yet “an enclosed order is like a kind of powerhouse,” as a character says in Rumer Godden's monastic novel *In This House of Brede*; I've come to think of these selfless souls as not just counsellors and models, but lighthouse-keepers of a kind.



Recovering Ukrainian soldiers pray during a four-day pilgrimage to the monasteries of Mount Athos. The November, 2024 stay was part of a psychological support program organized by Ukrainian authorities.

ALEXANDROS AVRAMIDIS/REUTERS

I never forget first meeting Leonard Cohen when he was living for five-and-a-half years in a Zen monastery in the dark mountains behind Los Angeles. At 61 he had sampled all the pleasures of the world and all the fruits of celebrity and global success. But cooking for his colleagues, scrubbing floors and shovelling snow was, he told me, “the real profound and voluptuous and delicious entertainment.” Here you find answers to every question, I ventured. No, he said. Here you find “freedom from questions. A landscape without doubt.”

He had meditated steadily at home; he already led a simple and strikingly uncluttered life in a duplex in an unfashionable part of Los Angeles he shared with his daughter. But none of that was the same as being part of a centuries-old order that deepened his understanding of compassion, devotion and surrender.

To go to a quiet retreat-house will always give us a valuable break from the world. Any kind of congregation can teach us the value of community. Nurses and firefighters instruct us in the value of courage and heroic service. But I’d be lost without the example – and the companionship – of full-time contemplatives.

In an age that’s so divided, nothing offers me more sustenance than a group of monks who extend themselves wholeheartedly even to those who do not share their faith. And in an age that can feel despairing, nothing gives me more confidence than a practice that has outlived a millennium of convulsions, wars and natural catastrophes. Monastics are the first to stress that they’re as human and fallible as the rest of us, but nobody in my life has given me a deeper sense of how we can recover resources that most of us too often forget.

A monk, Thomas Merton once wrote, is like a zero: Nothing in himself, but put zero at the end of any number, and its value increases by a factor of 10. We squander such power at our peril.

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-hospitals-for-the-soul-what-well-lose-when-monasteries-disappear/>

I have read just about everything Thomas Merton wrote—it was a lot—but before long I jettisoned “The Seven Story Mountain.” Then, I worked through all the volumes of his journals, and set everything else aside. The later volumes in particular are profound. They are Merton not writing for an audience as a good Catholic teacher pumping out the books that did much to bail his monastery out. Yet Thomas knew his own narcissism well enough to doubt his own ability even in his journals to be completely honest, not looking for worship from his reader, even himself. Thomas Merton gave us so much, even if he too would agree, there is more. I am still puzzled by his death. TJB