

How to Live: What the Rule of St. Benedict Teaches Us About Happiness, Meaning, and Community

Pages: 225

Publisher: Hampton Roads Publishing (April 1, 2018)

Format: pdf, epub

Language: English

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PRAISE

FOR *HOW TO LIVE*

"This is a timely book for troubled times, showing how the values and practices established by St. Benedict in the 6th century can help us lead happier lives. A self-professed workaholic, the author allows the reader to see how her life has changed for the better since she took this ancient wisdom to heart."

—KATHLEEN NORRIS, author of *The Cloister Walk*, *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography*, *Acedia and Me*, and *Amazing Grace*

"To have such a gifted writer live and report through the lens of *The Rule of St. Benedict* is a blessing for all of us. Judith Valente offers more than perspective. Her life's work is monastic. To read, reflect, and report is the role of a professional journalist. As an author and journalist, Valente has *The Rule of Benedict* for her editor. What a gift for us."

—MARY MARGARET FUNK, author of *Thoughts Matter*, *Tools Matter*, *Humility Matters*, and *Out of the Depths*

"Judith Valente has a knack for making the ancient *Rule of St. Benedict* come alive as a guidebook for today. With many examples and personal anecdotes, her presentation is insightful, delightful, and very honest. You will find yourself chuckling, but then checking to see where you've been hit."

—JEROME KODELL, author of *Don't Trust the Abbot: Musings from the Monastery* and *Life Lessons from the Monastery*

“Like all of Judith Valente's writing, this beautiful actualization of *The Rule of St. Benedict* is accessible, inviting, challenging, inspiring, and wise. Even if you've never once set foot in a Benedictine monastery, this book will help you live a more contemplative and centered life in the busiest of worlds—your own.”

—JAMES MARTIN, SJ, author of *Jesus: A Pilgrimage*

“*How to Live* is a warm, inviting, and accessible introduction to the wisdom of Saint Benedict and its continuing relevance for our time. Whether you are new to *The Rule* or have been following the Benedictine path for many seasons, this book will enrich you with its insights and charm.”

—CARL MCCOLMAN, author of *The Little Book of Christian Mysticism* and *Answering the Contemplative Call*

“For those of you who suspect that it is “high time to rise from sleep” this book holds much promise. Filled with the practical wisdom of St. Benedict, it is a work that can help you discern ways to enrich your daily life. With keen insights into monastic living, the author shares her own journey of discovering that *The Rule of Benedict* is not just for monks.”

—MACRINA WIEDERKEHR, author of *Seven Sacred Pauses*

For Thomasita Homan, OSB, who brought me to The Rule.

And, as always, for my husband, Charley.

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by Judith Valente

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Cover design by Jim Warner

Cover photograph Shutterstock © elenabsl

Interior by Maureen Forys, Happenstance Type-O-Rama

Typeset in Adobe Garamond Pro and Trajan Pro

Hampton Roads Publishing Company, Inc.

Charlottesville, VA 22906

Distributed by Red Wheel/Weiser, LLC

www.redwheelweiser.com

Sign up for our newsletter and special offers by going to www.redwheelweiser.com/newsletter.

ISBN: 978-1-57174-798-3

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data available upon request.

Printed in Canada

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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to express gratitude to Lisa Breger and Annie Parker for being early readers of the manuscript; Mary Lou Kownacki, OSB, Mary Ellen Plumb, OSB, and Anne McCarthy, OSB for reviewing the manuscript for accuracy; Joan Chittister, OSB for her insightful introduction; Kathleen Norris, Macrina Wiederkehr, OSB, and Mary Margaret Funk, OSB for their inspirational work on *The Rule*; Jane Hagaman of Red Wheel/Weiser and Addie Talbott for their careful editing; Greg Brandenburgh of Hampton Roads Publishing, without whose vision the book would not be possible; my agent, Amanda Annis of Trident Literary Agency, for her unwavering belief in this project; Ray Clem of Atchison for his cheerful support of me and all things Benedictine; the Benedictine sisters of Mount St. Scholastica for modeling *The Rule* for me; and my beautiful husband, Charles Reynard, for being my best editor and best friend.

Editor's Note: The epigraphs in this book are all taken from *The Rule of St. Benedict*. The chapter titles are noted in each one.

Translations of *The Rule* are adapted from *A Reader's Version of The Rule of St. Benedict in Inclusive Language*. Edited by Marilyn Schauble, OSB and Barbara Wojciak, OSB. Benetvision. 1989.

FOREWORD

The United States, young and bustling, new to the world, and racing to become something fresh and meaningful, is impatient with age. We are a living experiment in innovation and uniqueness. Europe and other older civilizations, on the other hand, are studies in transformation and tradition. They don't bulldoze the past to put up something new; they build on it from within and in the process make way for the new even as they preserve the old. Clearly, the underlying difference between the character of American cities and the cast and quality of European cities is obvious: it is the way each of these cultures deals with time.

The distinction is worth contemplating on more levels than one. The lesson to be considered here has as much to do with spiritual awareness as it does with architecture. It has something to tell us about the way we all view time.

Time is a continuum of empty ages filled only by the substance we bring to it ourselves. The temptation of every age is to discount the old, to worship at the shrine of the new. But the value of time lies as much in what we ourselves bring to the understanding of time as it does in what time brings to us. It is our awareness and interpretations of time that determine our own place in the development of the human spirit, of the spiritual impact of yesterday on tomorrow.

The deep down spiritual truth is that time is always and forever an invitation to growth. Whether the wisdom of the ages shapes us, or not, determines the nature of our civilization, the depth of our culture, the spiritual filter through which we ourselves, in our own time, mold the character of the world around us. If, as individuals, we understand time as the storehouse of our souls, explore it for answers to perennial questions, and test it for its value, then we stand to become the bearers of the wisdom of the ages. If not, we simply join the ranks of societies before us that walked through life untouched by time. We become one more excursion through epochs we failed to fathom, and so end devoid of the substance they were meant to bring us.

And yet, if we make the effort to trace the chain of life and thought and ideals that have brought us as a people from one moment in history to another, we make ourselves part of the passage to a healthy tomorrow. We are prepared, then, to go in our own times—where there is no road—and leave a path.

This book helps us see what we are losing; to make us taste what we're in danger of dismissing as unimportant. It reminds us of what we've missed but is still at hand, waiting to enliven the age in which we live as well as to be remembered for its contribution to the past.

This book, written in a period of political turmoil and personal angst, of national division and individual uncertainty, recalls us to the best of ourselves. It details for us the basis of good society. It brings us beyond the roiling headlines of the day to a consciousness of the little things that make for human community, healthy families, moral maturity, and personal peace and happiness.

But to do that, it takes us back to the thinking of the 6th century. It translates a moment of social upheaval for us and identifies a point of spiritual eruption, the impact of which still marks the world. Most importantly of all, it asks whether or not the ideas that lifted eras before us out of

darkness might be exactly what we need now to restore our own best selves in the here and now.

The document this book expounds as a guide for modern living is Benedict of Nursia's *Rule* for monastics. Written in the 6th century, it is still one of the preeminent spiritual treatises, a veritable guarantee of the good life. But why?

Because of its glorious, even extreme, asceticism? No, though it certainly models self-control.

Because of its rigorous prayer life? No, despite its commitment to regular and profound immersion in the mind of God.

Because of its demanding solitude and silence? Hardly, given all its concern for the upbuilding of the human community.

Then why? In a word: simplicity. Because of its attention to our undying desire to be truly happy. It describes for us what it takes to create genuine human community. It challenges us to find balance in the face of destructive competition. It encourages us to sharpen our commitment to cultivate the meaningful in life. It enables us to renew in ourselves the appreciation of humility in a world of narcissistic excess.

Or, to put it another way, it deals now, as then, with the likelihood of daily life to fray our nerves and wear down our early commitment to make everything in life a spiritual experience. Indeed, who among us does not need a spiritual path to lead us through the undergrowth of modern life, to heighten our consciousness of the sacred in the secular, to become whole?

Roman society knew the cost of war, the foolishness of debauchery, the stifling engorgement of excess on every level. Benedict's simple rule of life became a template for living, authentic to the core and a guide to the highest of spiritual heights through the ages. Yet always simple. Always genuine. Always truly human.

This book takes us to the heart of life—our own as well as the ideas of others. Judith Valente gives us the opportunity to plot our own lives and struggles against that of an ancient spirituality that has been the basis of life for thousands in the last fifteen centuries and is a torch for many still.

It is a book worth reading. Better yet, it is a book worth thinking about.

—JOAN CHITTISTER, OSB, AUTHOR OF *THE RULE OF BENEDICT*

1

YEARNING FOR LIFE

On Beginning

Is there anyone here who yearns for life and desires to see good days?

—FROM THE PROLOGUE TO *THE RULE OF ST. BENEDICT*

This is a book about living. Not about surviving, but living a balanced, meaningful, and attentive life. It is like a traveler's trunk that contains all the wisdom I wish I had acquired earlier in my life and seek now to pass on.

I can't take credit for originating these ideas. They come from the mind of a teacher who lived

more than fifteen hundred years ago. He originally wrote his guide, or *Rule*, for people living in a monastic community. Monasteries might seem like an unlikely source of wisdom for those of us living in the age of Instagram. And yet, this slender text has proved indispensable to people throughout the centuries seeking to live a saner, more peaceful life *outside* of a monastery. For me—a working journalist, an often overburdened professional, and a modern married woman—it has been a constant companion, never far from my work desk or nightstand.

The Rule of St. Benedict emerged from an era when a great civilization was under threat from violent outside forces. The economy favored the wealthy. Social norms were changing, and political leaders lacked the public's trust. Many blamed their anxiety on government, foreigners, or those of a different religion or race. Sound like the nightly news? Welcome to Rome in the 6th century.

St. Benedict was not a priest or a religious official. He was, however, a leader—a young man disillusioned with the conflict, greed, injustice, and lack of compassion he saw around him. He believed the gospels offered a wiser, more consequential way to live. He called himself and his followers “monks,” from the Greek *monos*, meaning one. It signaled they had one goal, to seek God and forge a new kind of society with single-minded devotion. The society Benedict and his monks constructed rested firmly on counter-cultural pillars.

Buffeted by war, Benedict didn't amass an army. He sought to build community. Instead of the false security of personal wealth, he endorsed the freedom of simplicity. His solution to daily threats of violence was to counsel his monks to sleep without their knives. To cope with the chaos around him, he embraced silence. He said: Replace grumbling with a sense of gratitude. Start each day with praise. Seek the common good and your own well-being will follow.

Community. Simplicity. Humility. Hospitality. Gratitude. Praise. These are the pillars of Benedictine spirituality. These are the things that matter. This is perhaps what we've forgotten.

Often it feels as though a genie of discord has escaped into the very air we breathe, liberating us to be our worst selves. We just have to read the news. A group of young men convene near the US White House, chanting “*Heil* victory, *Heil* our people,” and raise the fist Nazi salute. African-American middle school students are greeted with shouts of “Go back to Africa.” Strangers pull off the head scarves of Muslim women out shopping. Gay men hear taunts of “faggot” in the street. White supremacists bearing guns, clubs, and torches march in the center of American cities.

The Rule of St. Benedict invites an alternative vision. It is summed up in a single line from one of the shortest chapters in *The Rule*: “The Good Zeal of Monastics.” *Try to be the first to show respect to the other, supporting with the greatest patience one another's weaknesses of body or behavior.* This is the good St. Benedict says we are called to model. He asks us to nurture it zealously, *with fervent love.*

One of the most critically acclaimed fantasy films in recent years was a piece of science fiction called *The Arrival*. It is the story of beings from outer space who arrive on earth, igniting a wildfire of fear across the planet. Their language is unlike anything spoken or written, and it includes a unique perception of time. An expert linguist is tapped to initiate contact. If she cannot draw out the visitors' true intentions, the nations of the world will pool their weaponry and launch an all-out assault.

To show her own peaceful motives, the linguist enters the spacecraft, and at considerable risk to herself, removes her biohazard suit. She approaches the strange, multi-limbed creatures with palms open and outstretched. Her body language demonstrates she isn't there to attack. Slowly, by immersing herself in the aliens' language, she uncovers their purpose. Earth escapes an interplanetary disaster, not by superior weaponry or even acts of daring, but by bravely

communicating with those we don't at first understand. Success through empathy. In many ways, the film mirrors the parallel society the Benedictine *Rule* calls us to forge. One where the ability to listen, to communicate, and ultimately to understand delivers us from self-destruction.

"Who will dwell in your tent, O God? Who will find rest in your holy mountain? (Ps 15:1) ..." "Those who walk without blemish and are just in all dealings; who speak truth from the heart and have not practiced deceit; who have not wronged another in any way, nor listened to slander against a neighbor." (Ps 15:2–3)

—FROM THE PROLOGUE

The Benedictine *Rule* is as much a text for the spiritual beginner as it is for the spiritually mature. Some have described it as a guidepost. I like to think of it as a railing I can grab onto to steady myself when I encounter a dark, uncertain path. My own journey toward *The Rule* was hardly a direct route. A friend who is a Presbyterian minister recommended the text to me at a time when I had just moved back to the US from Europe and was embarking on a new phase of my writing career. He thought it might satisfy some of the spiritual unrest I was experiencing over whether I was doing enough with my life.

I thought it contained some lovely and thought-provoking passages. *Listen with the ear of the heart ... Day by day, remind yourself you are going to die. Hour by hour, keep careful watch over all you do ... Your way of acting must be different from the world's way.* There was also enough in the text that was strange and puzzling to prompt me to set it aside for nearly a decade. It wasn't until I saw *The Rule* lived in the daily context of a contemporary Benedictine monastery that I realized: here was the path I had been seeking.

Atchison, Kansas, is a city I had never thought about, much less visited, before I received an invitation to give a talk on *Touching the Sacred through Poetry* at the retreat center of Mount St. Scholastica, one of Atchison's two Benedictine monasteries. The offer came at a pivotal time for me, both professionally and personally. I had been married only two years. While my marriage was a blessing, I struggled as a second wife to forge a relationship with my two adult stepdaughters.

My first book, *Twenty Poems to Nourish the Soul*, had just come out, and that was another gift. But it, too, came with stresses. I began receiving requests from across the country to lead poetry workshops and retreats on weekends, all the while working my day job at the time as a contributing correspondent for PBS-TV and Chicago Public Radio. I arrived at Mount St. Scholastica on a Saturday night exhausted—physically, mentally, and emotionally. In fact, I felt like a fraud. I wondered how I was going to stand in front of a retreat group the next morning and talk about nourishing the soul when I hadn't fed my own soul a decent meal in weeks.

The morning I was to give my talk, I sat alone in the monastery's oak-lined chapel. Sunlight streamed in through the chapel's distinctive blue stained glass windows. Silence saturated the room. I looked up at the window in front of me. There was St. Benedict with outstretched arms. Surrounding him were some words in Latin: *omni tempore silentio debent studere*. I reached back to the Latin I had studied in college and did a rough translation: at all times, cultivate silence.

Suddenly, the paradox I had been living was staring me the face. I had been running around the country talking and talking, trying to help other people live a more contemplative life, when my own life was missing moments of silence and solitude in which I could simply listen and be.

The Mount sisters seemed keepers of a kind of secret. They balanced work with leisure, laughter with silence, work with prayer. I discovered that everything they do—from the way they eat to how they wash dishes, speak to one another, care for their sick, pray in chapel, and go about their daily

work—comes from St. Benedict's *Rule*. Though I didn't know it then, the line that had mesmerized me that morning in the chapel—*omni tempore silentio debent studere*—comes from *The Rule*. What these sisters had, I wanted. I arrived at Mount St. Scholastica a poetry expert of sorts. I left a student of *The Rule*.

"There are days that define your story beyond your life," the female linguist in *The Arrival* says at the beginning of the film. I felt that all of my past somehow had led me to this monastery on a hill and that the Benedictine *Rule* was reaching out to me from the ages.

Over the course of the next three years, I returned repeatedly to Mount St. Scholastica, mining *The Rule* for ways I could apply monastic values and practices to my daily life as a wife, stepmother, writer, and journalist. Benedict asks a pointed question in the book's prologue: *Is there anyone here who yearns for life and desires to see good days?* I wanted to shout, "Yes. Me. Here. Now!"

What, dear brothers and sisters, is more delightful than this voice of the Holy One calling to us. See how God's love shows us the way to life.

—FROM THE PROLOGUE

To delve deeply into *The Rule* is to discover just how astutely Benedict was writing in the 6th century. Recent discoveries about how the brain works buttress ideas he espoused before neuroscience was even a word. Paul Zak is an economist and brain researcher who has studied the effect on the human psyche of a powerful hormone called oxytocin. This is the chemical released in lovemaking, in women who have just given birth, as well as in people who have just acted in some way that benefits others. Zak calls oxytocin "the morale molecule."

Using a variety of research experiments, Zak found that those who give usually end up receiving in return. One person's generosity can even increase the oxytocin levels in another. In other words, human beings appear hardwired for community. We prosper most when we extend trust and receive it in return. The economic models we learn in MBA programs would have us believe the opposite—that self-interest is the fundamental human motivator. Zak, by contrast, found that trusting and exhibiting generous behavior leads to reciprocal generosity and trust.

"The most important factor in determining whether or not a society does well or is impoverished," Zak concluded, "is not natural resources, education, quality health care, or even the work ethic of its people. What matters most in determining outcomes is actually trustworthiness—a moral consideration."

This sounds a good deal like the community Benedict sought to create, and the one he entrusts us to build today. He foresaw the dangers of radical self-interest of the kind that led to the economic meltdown of 2008 and to the Great Depression (as well as other economic crises before and since then), to practices like slavery and apartheid, and to so many of the world's wars. *No one is to pursue what he judges better for himself* to the detriment of others. This Benedict counseled nearly two millennia before oxytocin was even discovered.

The Rule also has a message for those of us on call twenty-four seven, swirling in a maelstrom of email, texting, Twitter, and Snapchat. It beckons as a plea for balance. Benedict carved the monastic day into distinct periods for work, prayer, reading, leisure, and rest. He believed there is a time to work, and a time to stop work. As someone who has long suffered from a dual diagnosis of workaholic and overachieverism, *The Rule* showed me that it is possible to pause, to care for myself, and still be productive. With its focus on balance, *The Rule* helps orient my attention toward the sacred in the ordinary. It propels me to *live* every day. *

The Rule of St. Benedict arose from an era when a great civilization was threatened by violence, economic forces that favored the wealthy, political leaders that lacked the trust of the public, and rampant xenophobia. Similar to the anxieties and frustrations of the 6th century, we are living in a time where societies need to stress community over competition, consensus over conflict, simplicity over self gain, and silence over the constant chatter and distractions of our lives.

In *How to Live*, Judith Valente explores the key elements of the rule and clearly demonstrates how incorporating this ancient wisdom can change the quality and texture of our lives offering a way forward from the divisions gripping our country. These fresh and profound explorations are inspiring and thoughtful, and will motivate readers to live a meaningful life.

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