

A Monk's Way

The Journey to Awareness

Author's Note

It is evident that traditional religion, with its tenets, dogma and responses, has not been enough to satisfy a multitude of people in our age. It has left them spiritually unfulfilled. For most people, it is the only formal introduction that they have had to Spirit, and when it has failed them, the choice left to them is either to leave it all behind or look again by embarking alone on a new path of discovery.

This is a story of one who started that journey of discovery — in the very heart of a great religious institution no less — and succeeded in finding his answer — sometimes in spite of his religion. Though his search is non-traditional, he finds what was missing — a direct connection to God — and he discovers ways to activate that connection.

To write about spiritual concepts in a clear and precise way is a very difficult exercise. As exquisite and beautiful as English can be, sometimes words or phrases fail to express an exact meaning. Occasionally, there are no words or phrases that exist to do it; or, sometimes the limitations of a writer's abilities hinder capturing the faithful expression of meaning.

In religious or spiritual instruction, it is not unusual to rely on story-telling — or parable — to give the listener or reader a precise sense of meaning by illustration. This was my intent in creating the personage of Jean Moreau. It is up to him, via his story, to explain concepts and truths that are not only important, but eternal.

Often writers see their characters take on personalities all their own, and Jean Moreau seems to me now an intimate friend. I hope he becomes that kind of friend for you. He and I will continue to work on projects in the future and I am looking forward to that collaboration.

Please note that I reference God as both Mother and Father. Naturally, you are free to see Him or Her as you please. I use the French “abbé” (ah-bay) for the English “abbot”. Also, note that the French pronunciation of Jean is equivalent to “zhaw(n)” in English. Finally, I use monastery and abbey interchangeably here.

To hear more from Jean Moreau, or read his commentaries, visit the website of Kervenec (www.kervenec.org) regularly. There you will find his blog, along with abbey events and news and free downloads. His and the abbey's story will continue in a second work. You can register to be notified when it is available at the abbey site above or at www.clarkeide.com. and @clark_eide, where the author's blog can be found.

Now, let's go and meet our friend, Jean Moreau.

Preface

“Know thyself.”

The Delphi Oracle

My name is Jean Moreau, a monk in the abbey of Kervennec in Brittany, France, and I have a question for you. In the Western world, how do we judge success? What is it to which most people aspire? What is it that they think they will have, or be, when they finally have it? What would you say?

I think often it is connected to the “four Ps” — position, possession, power, and prestige. While I do not mean to disparage the world’s idea of success, I will submit that it does not contain the seeds that will bear the fruit of contentment.

Visitors here at the abbey are often of the “gated community” set from around the world. They would be what the world would certainly call successful. What has made them successful in the world’s eyes — a degree, parenthood, business success, becoming a leader, a teacher or an authority of some kind — no longer holds its appeal or perhaps no longer plays a principal role for them. While the lives they have led as successful people in the world have brought them some satisfaction, something is still missing.

Like our own monks here at Kervennec, behind those gates they hunger for more in life. Unlike us at Kervennec, however, they are often not sure what that “more” is. All evidence tells us that these “four Ps” are not the stuff of happiness — at least not all by themselves.

I feel particularly drawn to these people, as I have been a seeker myself. Many have yet to find the path to Awareness and thus to Spirit, which is the only place that one will find fulfillment. I have found that path to Awareness and the peace it brings, though it has hardly been an orthodox path, as you will see in these pages. I am writing this now to share my experiences and to help give good people a hand in finding that path.

Of course, there is nothing easy about life. It is a training ground — basic training — rigorous and unforgiving in its demands and its realities. It is the preface and preparation for our true Life in the Eternal realm that awaits us. I have had, in my own life, my share of happy and sad moments, emotions of every ilk. No, I didn’t come from one gated community in France to join another, but from a middle-class family with all of the values attached to it that one would expect, especially the world’s idea of success. From traversing sometimes obscure and wandering pathways, I have found a different definition of success — a lasting one. It’s my wish to show you what I have learned about real success through trial and, especially, through error. As you will see, as a monk I have been spared none of what life delivers, despite being who and where I am. What I intend to illustrate in these pages is that, when connected to our Source, all in this life is made more beautiful and satisfying, and most importantly, meaningful.

How a life unfolds, with its vast matrix of conscious and unconscious interactions, set within the unimaginable scale and complexity of a universe that exists both within us and without, is, well, often a mystery to our sleepy human minds. But at base, life is a search for meaning, of — “Who am I?” and by connotation, who we all are — as human and particularly as spiritual beings. I can tell you that my search for meaning has brought me fulfillment in ways I could not have dreamed. I no longer have many doubts shadowing me, doubts about where we have come from and our reasons for being here. How I have arrived at this peaceful state is the essence of my story. Some of what I will profess in these pages will be what you would expect from a monk, some of it will most certainly surprise you. In the end, it is quite simply my hope that what I have written may aid you in your own search for fulfillment, now and in the Eternal.

Peace be unto you.

Part One

My Home in the Monastery, My Roots, Our Life Here

Chapter One

Kervennec and the Rhythm of Abbey Life

"I have freed my soul."

—*Abbé Bernard of Clairvaux, Letter to Abbot Suger*

I remember the first time I really noticed the beauty of Kervennec. I hadn't been here very long. It was in the early winter — December, I think. I was walking back to my room after breakfast and the abbey stones had begun to show their golden hue at the dawning of the day. Accompanying first light was some haze, which gave the ancient walls an otherworldly look. I remember smiling to myself and thinking how perfect the moment was and imagining how that scene had repeated itself day after day, season after season — century after century — and here I was, another witness to it, and caught short by it all.

As I continued my walk that morning, what I could not have imagined was what was waiting in the wings for me here — how the love of a woman would bring me to my knees and how my indiscretions nearly had me removed from this place that I love best. But God and my angels never let me fall that far. In fact, it was through that turmoil that I found a more perfect Union with my heavenly Father/Mother. With God's help, my redemption has been complete. That is the story I am about to relate.

Going back in my memory to those early days, I remember the first time I really heard the music here, too. I had been so busy trying to learn my parts in each song that until that revelatory instant I had not really heard it. What a moment it was when it finally did find its way into my consciousness — a moment that I will never forget. We were singing one of the Divine Offices. It was Vigils, our first service of the day. On that particular day, instead of just reading and singing my part, something seemed to take hold of me and to distance me from the physical. It was as if I were transported to someplace where I was watching the whole of the proceedings from another vantage point. My ears were suddenly open to the wonder of the unmistakable sound of our chant. It was resonating with the words of the Psalms, words far older than our abbey walls. The chant's purity and sonority and its depth of feeling came home to me, and it has been that way ever since; simple and ancient as those melodies are and as ever-present as they are in our worship, chant still has the power to move me emotionally and to lift me spiritually. When I sing, I imagine the hundreds, no, the thousands of brothers who have come before me here chanting these very same melodies with their eternal texts. I find myself, as I did that day, readily able to connect to my spiritual ancestors, my spiritual roots. It is a magical feeling and floods me with a wonderful sense of continuity and community.

What is my motivation, my "mission," for being here at Kervennec? I will tell you simply that my mission here in the abbey is to make the effort to know myself — my true self. Why? That true self shares in the divinity of God. Being united to Him is where all true joy lies, so that is the connection that I seek. It is only after I have come to understand my true self and my authentic nature in Spirit that I will be able to know and enjoy a fulfilling relationship with my Father/Mother in heaven. Without that intimate knowledge about myself, I can never have an intimate knowledge of my Creator.

I know that some think that an abbey is just a retreat from the world. I can tell you that it is hardly that. It is, in fact, quite the opposite. It is an embracing of life in all of its depth, in all of its complexities. What can be more difficult for a person than to be alone with him or herself without distraction, hour after hour, day after day? I search for myself and for God in the quiet of prayer and meditation. I also search for these things in my relationships with my brothers in the abbey. Think about what challenges there are in living in close proximity to the same group of men, private and enclosed, for life. I can tell you that there are many — as in any family. But these challenges, if we do not shy away from them, allow me and my brothers to get to the heart of things; things like self-knowledge, brotherly love — Jesus'

second commandment — and understanding. They build character. They are opportunities. Through them, I have come to understand in mini-steps what makes me “tick” and what God wants of me to make His imperfect creature as perfect as he can be in this lifetime. I want to know the emotional man, the rational man, and ultimately, by the grace of God, come to know my eternal self, my spiritual man. When I have accomplished those things, then I can come to know my Creator. In knowing God, I will be complete, wanting for nothing.

Let me tell you more about everyday life here. Our days in the abbey are always busy and productive. It's not all work though. Everyone knows that all work makes us not just dull boys, but not very balanced human beings. None of us want that, so we combine work and prayer with personal and community time in a very satisfying way. This method of living each day has come down to us with very little change from St. Benedict, who conceived it and encoded it in his *Rule*, now known as *The Rule of St. Benedict*, fifteen hundred years ago!

St. Benedict. God raises up the right men at the right time — and the right time was the fifth century, when stability was a disappearing dream after the Pax Romana. He was a man of astounding wisdom, stuck as he was in the abyss of the Dark Ages. The genius of St. Benedict is embedded in the wisdom of the Rule. It is comprised of many parts, but perhaps the most enlightened is the concept of the structure of the abbey day. St. Benedict was very specific about how the day and the responsibilities of work and prayer should be organized. We Benedictines have the motto “Work and Pray.” It is anything but an empty credo, that I can tell you, and every year I appreciate its brilliance more and more.

Here is a little about the structure of our day: We start our singing of antiphons (short verses of scripture) and Psalms from the first moment we gather every day. During the whole waking day, we sing six Divine Offices and celebrate a Mass. An Office is a time of prayer and adoration as a community. St. Benedict knew the power of worship as a community, and he also knew the discipline it brings to the contemplative life. In that act of coming together, we strengthen our spiritual resolve and challenge ourselves to grow in brotherly love and patience. In the Offices, we have the prayer structure we need to thrive as men on earth but live with one foot in Paradise.

St. Benedict knew that any life devoted to God had to be practical as well as contemplative. Everyday life as it exists on earth cannot be ignored. The *Rule* lets us immerse ourselves in the work and affairs of the life of the senses, within a structure that gives us ample time for the development of our immortal souls. We need time daily to appreciate who we are, why we are, and Who made us, to worship and commune with our God. We also need to provide for ourselves and our bodies. We are not, many of us, constructed to be hermits. Thus, our community gives us what we need to thrive on every level.

Each monk is expected to attend all of the Offices and to be on time, but Père Abbé, head of the abbey and our spiritual Father, can grant someone a special leave should one of us have a duty that requires missing an Office. I myself love our rituals so much I feel empty if on occasion I might miss one.

We perform most of the Offices in the abbey church. Vigils is our first Office. Vigils is often sung in the dark or at dawn in our abbey, depending upon the season. It is an especially beautiful service. It is the time of day when the earth seems new and the spirit and its energies most palpable. It is the time of day when the distance between our world of activity, life on earth as it were, and the peace and incisive wisdom of the next world, that of the spirit, is lessened. At that hour, the “veil is thin” between the two worlds.

Following Vigils we have some time for ourselves, individually, or for sharing a cup of coffee and a snack with our brother monks, before heading back to the church to start the next Office, Lauds. The Latin meaning of that word translates into English as “praise.” This Office, along with that of Vespers in late afternoon, are my next two favorites.

Lauds is full of chanting the praises of God in its selections of Psalms and antiphons. For me it is a second beginning to my day. Lauds is one of the longest services, lasting a half hour or more, but it is a most beautiful one.

If you picture in your mind the “choir” in our church, which is situated on the altar side of the communion rail, you can picture how we gather. We sit in two groups, facing one another. We have nineteen monks on each side. Our iterations of the songs are sung as if by two separate choirs. One choir, or “side,” sings a certain number of the verses of a Psalm. Then the other side continues singing the next few verses, and so on. At certain times, we sing together, usually at the conclusion of the Psalm. This echo effect is very nice and it is also wonderful to be able to face our brothers while chanting. There is a heightened sense of community and intimacy in performing our services like this. We feel as one band, one brotherhood, united there before the Lord enjoying the rapture of these prayers and melodies.

When Lauds is finished, we go to breakfast. Benedictine monks eat well! This was a strong mandate written into the *Rule* by St. Benedict. Men in the abbey need to eat wholesome and filling foods, with as much of it as possible being produced by the men themselves from the farms, orchards, and gardens. Much like an army, a monastery marches on its stomach, and our cooks do their best to give us interesting and tasty meals. We eat in silence after the abbé sings a prayer, but we always have — or should I say, we usually have — an interesting reading that is chanted by a brother throughout the meal. It can be something written by a monk or saint, books or letters, and it is often quite humorous. We sit on the perimeter of the dining room at long tables in assigned places. The meals in our refectory are for monks and male visitors only, who eat at a table reserved for them. If families or women wish to come and stay with us, we welcome that. We have another nice area where they can be served.

After breakfast we have free time until Mass at ten o'clock. Mass generally lasts about an hour. We follow the Roman Catholic Church's liturgical calendar of feast days and seasons. After that celebration, many of us have specific duties to attend to, such as working at the monastery shop or farm, or administrative duties to perform. Time can go quickly and before we know it we're gathered again in the church for Sext, the short Office that concludes our morning worship and is followed by the next community gathering at lunch. We have another brief Office together after our lunch called None before we breakup to continue our work for the day.

My work has consisted of helping at the shop, general cleaning, and offering help on the farm in season. I have always been good with numbers, so I have helped on the finance side a little bit.

I mentioned Vespers earlier. It is celebrated in late afternoon. The sung liturgy is exquisite, rivaling Lauds. It is at this time that we see the greatest number of outside visitors of any service. It is a lovely way to wind down the day and prepare for evening, especially in winter. We emerge to a dark world and I find the sense of community heightened then. I also think we are at our finest voice at that time of day, which enhances the liturgy. An hour or so later finds us back at the refectory for dinner, and then we finish the day at about 8:45 p.m. with Compline, our last Divine Office for the day.

People often wonder if we are allowed talk to each other at the abbey. That is a great question, to which I answer, simply, yes, we can talk. Monasteries all differ on how they treat silence, however. At Kervennec, we have certain times reserved for silence — from 8:00 p.m. to 8:00 a.m. and at meals. We have one quiet time after recreation in the afternoon, prior to Vespers. At all other times, the idea is to not make unnecessary conversation. I don't find these rules difficult to follow.

All in all, it is a most pleasant and efficient organization of the day and allows us to fulfill perfectly St. Benedict's monastic vision “to work and to pray.” There is nourishment of the soul, mind, and body, beautifully intertwined. While

this kind of life is not for everybody, if the world could take the best parts of our lifestyle — working, praying, and living in peaceful community — wouldn't it be a beautiful world?...

...A Challenging Time, a Time of Trouble

Chapter Nine

Elena

"What is a friend? A single soul dwelling in two bodies."

— Aristotle, quoted by Diogenes Laertius

Elena! Where do I begin? I want to tell you everything about her, this kind and blessed human, my soul mate...and my greatest challenge. Elena is a woman who has intrigued me all of my adult life. I can hear you saying to yourself, "A monk with a female soul mate?" It is true. This radiant soul and I had a bond that we felt from the beginning of our acquaintance. We met at university in Brest. She just had that "way," that something that attracted me from the start. It has always been exciting just to see her, anytime — after class, around town, on outings, at the monastery. I can't put it into words, really. The best I can do is to quote a young visiting novice. We were in discussions about sexuality and its lures and attractions, among other things. As he spoke about a woman he had once been very attracted to, he said, "She just rattled my cage." I haven't found a more apt description of the "process" yet! It was an attraction that grew into much more than a physical one. We think the same about things, we enjoy the same things, we love our God the same way, passionately; and, we love each other.

At university, we did not meet until late in our last year. But it took just those few months for us to learn so much about each other and to come to know each other's intimate thoughts like we had been lifelong friends. It was a very sad day when we parted, me for the monastic life, eventually, and her for her artist's dream. But, we knew our choices were the correct ones, no matter how painful it might be for each of us for a while, and painful it was for some time. I had the sense that I had lost the one person in whom I could confide, and I was starting on a path in life that could be quite lonely at times. I didn't enter the monastery right away, but took a job as a salesperson with a travel agency in Angers, still not quite convinced about my vocation. Elena was based in Brest but traveled quite a bit in Europe for her inspiration.

We knew, of course, that we could write to each other. But I had a premonition that that would not last with our respective careers developing. I was right and our correspondence soon petered out. Writing could not replace what we had experienced in person during those intense few months. We never became intimate but it was on my mind and I am sure that it was on hers. She didn't need to say it. I could see the longing on her face; and I could make no secret of my physical desires. Still, I knew it was for the best to leave that as it was, knowing that my life might soon change. And if I had pressed it, she would have resisted, I believe, to spare me the task of confessing it when I would commence my priestly training. She was, and is, so unselfish.

A lot of our time together we spent out of doors. She is a lover of nature, as am I. It is there we feel God really resides on the physical plane. Nature offers us a chance to get back to our roots, no pun intended. There is no pressure from others or from daily life, no interruptions in our thinking or our meditating about things, just a sense of oneness and unity that is hard to experience anywhere else. I wish sometimes that I had made a fastidious record of all that we discussed. Some of it, in light of life's experiences, would now seem trite, I am sure; but there were bits of wisdom here and there that would be fun to see now. Such a diary would serve, if nothing else, as a history of a friendship, with its serious side, its inanities, its insights, its humor, and mostly, its connection.

Our story recommenced a little more than a year ago. Out of the blue she contacted me. What a surprise it was! She had written to me and asked if she could come and see me: Would I be available one day so that we might catch up on things, talk about old times, and get reacquainted? I was delighted to have heard from her so I naturally said yes. We quickly fixed a rendezvous for later that same week. She would come to the abbey to meet me. I had decided that if the weather was nice, we could have a walk around the grounds and maybe take a sandwich and have a picnic.

The day arrived and fortunately it was a beautiful Breton day. The wind was fresh and bright clouds were rapidly pushing past high in the azure sky. Elena arrived right on time. As she approached the *accueil*, or welcome center for the abbey, I could make out the familiar shape of her face and her tall, slim body. She cut a lovely figure. As she approached, it seemed to me that she had hardly aged. Tall and angular, with only a hint of gray now invading her long dark hair, she was still striking in appearance. I remember that I suddenly became conscious of my own appearance — something that hadn't concerned me in quite that way for years! I let that thought go — fortunately, my cassock hides a multitude of sins!

I met her enthusiastically and gave her kisses on each cheek. She responded in like fashion and smiled warmly.

"Hello, Jean! Or, should I say, 'Father'?"

I smiled and then chuckled a little. "No, Elena, I think I'll always be 'Jean' to you!"

As I was speaking, I couldn't help but stare at my beautiful friend. In fact, I couldn't take my eyes off of her — all of those years, and now, here she was, here we were, together again.

"How did you find me, hermit that I am?" I asked, trying not to be nervous.

She smiled that big smile and responded, "Well, I'll tell you. I was reading one of our university newsletters last week and you came into my mind. It got me to thinking more about you. To be honest, I have thought of you so many, many times over the years. We were so close and I missed you, but I knew that you were otherwise 'occupied'! But after getting that newsletter and with you fresh on my mind, I became more and more curious about where you had ended up. I wasn't sure if you were still in this area, so I decided to call around a few parishes in Brest a couple of weeks ago. One priest there said that he recognized your name and thought you were here at Kervennec.

"I came out here a month or so ago to get some ideas for a project I am looking at doing, and also just to visit the place. Of course, I had no idea that you were here. Funny, but I hadn't ever been to Kervennec before, even though it's not that far. I had a nice walk around and toured the church and the other buildings. Crazy to think now that you were here so near to me.

"Anyway, I wrote to you and, voilà, here you are, an hour from Brest — not quite as 'hermity' as you'd like to think!"

There it was — that sassy sense of humor. How I had missed it!

"Well, okay, you got me there — I'm not quite a hermit," I admitted. "But it must have been your feeling my vibrations here during your first visit that aroused your curiosity!"

"No doubt!"

Back and forth we went like that for a while. I remember how I enjoyed gazing at her thoughtfully as she brought me up to date on common friends and other happenings. She seemed calm and confident to me. She had a look in her

eyes, in her regard, that was very peaceful. There is something about her face and eyes that has always conferred a softness about her. She also has what appears to be a sort of perpetual half-smile on her mouth that gives her a look of approachability.

After a bit, we decided to take a long stroll around the monastery grounds and we continued to talk. She was a little reluctant to speak too much of herself at the start but she asked me lots of questions about my lifestyle now and what had transpired for me over the last twenty-plus years. I told her things of a general nature — how I feel here, what a typical day is like, a little about some of my brother monks...things rather banal. We were sitting in one of the monastery's public gardens when she decided to open up a little more about her own life those past two decades. Her story was like many others these days, full of hope and then disappointment, a modern world sometimes grown cruel.

"I got married at twenty-five. Not too long after university, really," she explained. "I had lost contact with you then, Jean. You must have been here already. Those years were a sad time for me. I was only married for four years before divorcing."

I was curious how someone so mature and assured could be linked to that kind of personal disappointment, even failure, as I know it seemed to her.

"What do you think happened?" I asked her.

She sighed and said, "During the last two years or so of our marriage, I sensed a great change coming through me. I realized that I had a real need to explore my existence, my spirituality, my whole sense of who I am and where I come from. I think I had a midlife crisis!" she said, lightening her tone just a bit. "But seriously, I started to read a lot and attended many talks and gatherings in the city attached to things spiritual. I found myself opening up to new thinking and exposed to new and different ideas, and I liked it."

"That is wonderful, Elena. It sounds like a real awakening. That does change a person. What did your husband think of all of this — didn't like it too much?"

"That's just it, Jean. Julian found the 'new' me very disquieting and he even tried to forbid me from continuing to attend things that he considered threatening to him or 'evil.' But, you know, Jean, by then I had gone much too far and I was not about to stop the one thing that was fulfilling me and that was bringing me to another level of awareness. Our marriage had never been a strong one, so I left. At the end, I didn't think there was any hope."

"Wow, Elena, that had to be tough."

"That's not the half of it," she continued. "I felt very bad, of course, as you can imagine, but he was distraught. We had no kids and thus no reason to keep seeing each other, and I wanted a fresh start and really didn't want to talk to him anymore about any of it or to even see him. There was no point. It was finished. Then the other shoe dropped. Julian died two years later — a rare form of cancer. It was all so sudden, so quick. It really stunned me. But, he was gone and the finality of it all struck me. I thought, 'I really am on my own.' I got used to it eventually but it was hard to live through."

"I am sorry you had all of that sadness, Elena." I could see a touch of that sadness was still there all these years later — it was in those lovely eyes.

“Thank you, Jean,” she said. “It’s okay now. It’s been a long time, more than fifteen years. It gave me a chance to redefine who I am. And also to continue my studies of the spirit and the energetic world around us...how it all manifests. That continues to be exciting to me.”

As usual that afternoon we were on the same wavelength about so many things. I was happy to hear that part about her spiritual self. Everyone’s journey to that place is different, but all of us can get to that place where we become seekers, regardless of our situation in life or the point of view we may have been taught or have developed, whatever life throws at us.

I then wanted to break the spell of that sad story and change the topic a bit — there was still a lot I wanted to know about my dear friend.

“What do you do for fun?” I decided to ask.

“I visit priests in old abbeys.”

“BORING!” I shot back.

“Oh, it’s not that bad. It depends on the priest! Some are very interesting, I know, and very good-looking.”

“Present company excluded, no doubt!”

“Oh, you always were handsome, Jean, and you know it! There were some broken hearts in Brittany when you entered the seminary...”

“Too bad I didn’t know about it — I might have been swayed!”

It was after saying this that some uncomfortable thoughts started to reveal themselves to me. Maybe it was more uncomfortable feelings than thoughts. I was smiling outwardly as if taken in by my own funny remark, but I knew in an instant looking at Elena how much my last words might contain a truth I didn’t want to own at this time.

“I don’t think so — you are happy here, I can see it,” she replied.

I was listening but not concentrating, still aware of those new feelings I was experiencing.

After a little hesitation, I replied. “You always had a brilliant mind, Elena. You hit the nail on the head. I couldn’t have chosen better.” Suddenly that statement felt a little forced with the state of mind I was in.

I went on anyway, though a little off-balance. “But you still haven’t answered my question — what’s fun for you? It’s about time you tell me tell me about what YOU do all day!”

“Yes, I do have a real life...” she replied.

“Then tell me all about it. I’d be shocked if someone of your talent and charm did not have a ‘real life’ and an interesting one at that. By the way, how do you fight the guys off?”

As I said this, I wasn't convinced I was asking only out of polite interest — I realized that perhaps I was more invested in her answer than I should have been. A spark of jealousy came out of nowhere before she even spoke. I wasn't sure I even wanted to hear what she had to say.

"Jean...whoa...sorry, but men — who needs them!" She let out that hearty laugh of hers. Then she quickly added, "Just kidding — I know there are some really good ones out there. I'm talking to one."

I felt pleased. But the feelings wanted to know more. What if I had followed up on this wonderful relationship with Elena? What if I hadn't gone to become a priest, but instead shared my life with her? I remember the unmistakable thrill of goose bumps running up my spine and down my arms as those thoughts materialized.

It had all passed through my mind in a millisecond and I gave her a look like she was a naughty girl and said, "Let's not talk about me anymore, you charmer. Tell me more about your 'real life.'" I wanted to move on.

"Well, I am an artist, or didn't you know?" she replied with some energy.

"I knew you liked painting...but, pray tell, what have you been doing with your talent?" I tried to stay light and loose.

"Something close to your heart as a priest I am sure — stained glass!"

"Ufff, I don't like a lot of stained glass. It makes me think of sad old dark churches with a heavy, heavy feeling and saints being chopped up into bitty pieces as martyrs, and..."

"Stop, already, Jean, for heaven's sake! You're making me hate it, too!" she laughed. "But, you know, my dear prelate, there are some motifs running through stained glass that are a bit lighter. And, believe it or not, my fine churchman, some stained glass is not for religious consumption!"

"Well, I'd have to see it to believe it!"

"Stop up and see some of my etchings sometime," Elena teased me.

When I heard her say that, I must confess that my feelings got the better of me. I felt things in a sexual way I had not felt for years. I found a lot of enjoyment in it, and, unfortunately, I didn't try to stop it. There were warning bells ringing in my head. I recovered as best as I could by saying, "You haven't changed a bit, Elena!"

She smiled and continued. "I don't know if you even knew that, besides my painting, I had started some stained glass work towards the end of university. I probably never mentioned it as I really didn't get heavily involved in it until after graduation. Anyway, I really liked it and continued that while I was doing odd jobs and studying painting. I really love doing it now and consider it my dream job. I have been able to launch a career in stained glass. I am even getting commissions now!"

"Commissions...that's great, Elena!"

"Yes, and maybe even a big one," she went on. "The nuns at the Abbey of St. Michel are looking for someone to redesign their church windows in stained glass. They've asked me to make a presentation."

"Aha, they'll have you enlisted in their abbey before you know it! Sister Mary Elena, resident saint...and artist!"

That broke the mounting tension for a moment.

"I'd be a tough nut to crack, Jean. Of course, I am sure they'd never have me — with my checkered past!" She laughed again. "But, you know, having said that, the peace and the quality of the people I have met at abbeys makes me think and feel that something great is going on with that lifestyle."

"And now you've met me and I've spoiled it all for you!" I said, starting to feel a little more like my normal self.

"You're such a goofball," she replied. "I love that about you. But, yes, you're right!"

After that we decided to take another long walk through some of the orchards and gardens. The time went quickly. I wanted the afternoon to go on and on but when Elena glanced at her watch and saw how late it had gotten, it was time for her to think about leaving, so we walked back. We stopped just before the abbey gate.

"Elena, I want to tell you how glad I am that you took the trouble to find me and to come visit today. It was great fun to see you again and talk of so much."

I remember then adding, as much more than just a polite gesture, "I hope we can do it again soon."

"Me, too," she responded.

I was thrilled in one sense to hear that. In my other ear, I could hear my guardian angel whispering a little warning. We walked to her car.

"I'll see you soon, Padre," she said with a warm smile and a kiss on the cheek.

Then she left.

That's how it all got started once more.

I realized as I walked back to my room that Elena's type of feminine presence was exactly complementary to my masculine energy. I missed it. Our meeting that day was the thing that started a chain of events that brought me much pain — but also brought me much wisdom. Sometimes it all seems to go together. We need the one to kick-start the other; and so it has always been for man on this beautiful planet. I can tell you that those events forced me to deal with things brought up very rudely from my subconscious to my conscious mind that needed my attention. Though I hardly would wish to experience a challenge like that again, with God's help and love I am the better for it now, this I know. She was the catalyst for that growth — and how grateful I am to her for that.

I remember also on that walk back to my room feeling exhilarated yet befuddled. I was feeling a kind of excitement about life that I had not felt in some time...and I was feeling the stirrings of desire. Being with Elena once more had evoked these things.

I had time after she left before the Office of Vespers, so I sat in my beloved chair in my room and closed my eyes, trying to understand my real self and its needs and desires, but also, I confess, savoring the feeling of her. I certainly then hoped that we would see each other again soon — little did I realize then what complications lay ahead for us. But more on that as my story unfolds.

Chapter Ten

A Return Visit

“Summer afternoon — summer afternoon; to me those have always been the two most beautiful words in the English language.”

— Henry James, *An International Incident*

It was about a month later that I received another note from Elena saying that she would like to stop by and see me. Naturally, I was delighted. I had found myself thinking of her so often since that first visit. She had brought me something, I can only call it an energy, that was different than any other I knew. I missed that whatever-it-was.

We decided that we would meet one afternoon the following week at Kervenec. The prospect was very exciting for me. I remember that day well. The morning services and meditations seemed to drag on a bit. Lunch was perfunctory, and I found its reading particularly stodgy. It was a series of letters written by a cardinal from Italy to various people in the 1930s. Not too inspiring. By dessert, I found myself deep in my own thoughts, anticipating the afternoon to come with Elena.

At two o'clock, I was at the welcome center to meet her. She was right on time, having driven from Brest in her snappy little white Renault. She looked great, dressed modestly in a business suit, but still so very lovely and feminine. She had a big smile on her face as she gently embraced me. After a short chat, we walked slowly over to the public garden area. As we approached the same bench we had used the last time, Elena stopped me and asked if we could just keep walking, maybe down through the orchard. So off we went, finding another bench much further away, near the end of the orchard.

“I love being outside here. The beauty of nature just seems to burst into my head and senses. Everything about it seems more intense. I'm not sure why — the place just has that effect on me,” Elena declared.

“Oh, it's probably really the company,” I remember joking.

She rolled her eyes appropriately at my bad joke as we sat down together.

I noticed her happy look as she gazed out across the deserted orchard. There was a peace that I could feel emanating from her person. I was able to relax with it and enjoy its flow and the beautiful surroundings. We sat there quietly for several minutes, each in our own thoughts, not really needing to speak.

Elena was the first to break the silence. “I haven't called you Father Jean yet — it would sound funny. I've hardly called you Jean or anything else either, for what, twenty years?” She sounded wistful and then she added, “Is it really okay, or would you prefer Father?”

“Elena, you can call me anything you'd like. I don't care. It would get a little tiresome, though, to always hear ‘Father.’ Weird, actually. Like I said the last time you were here, I feel like I will always be Jean to you.”

We were quiet again some moments.

“You know how pleased I am you have come to visit again, don't you?” I asked.

“Me, too, Jean. I had hoped you would be,” she assured me, softly.

Again nothing more was said for a few minutes.

“Do you remember Sylvie from school?” She had been a girl I had dated my third year at university. Why I was bringing this up, I really wasn’t sure.

“Sylvie Martin? Yes, I do. She was really pretty as I remember. I didn’t know her well, though. You mentioned her once or twice to me at school.”

“I wonder what she’s doing now...” I said.

Elena looked surprised, and said innocently enough, “It never occurred to me that you might be interested in a woman!”

I smiled to myself when she said that. I could tell then she felt a bit embarrassed at her statement and she tried to soften it.

“I mean, you were certainly very attractive at university...” she stopped again, suddenly seeming very self-conscious. She turned a slight shade of red as she looked for a way to exit what was for her a precarious conversation topic.

“Well, I mean you still are, Jean, you know...” she said, in her attempt to right herself. She stopped then again, obviously not quite knowing where to go from there. As her old friend, and one who teased her a lot back in the day, I watched and grinned sadistically, trying to contain the mirth I felt at her attempts to extricate herself from the discomfort she was feeling with her comments. Then I gave out a hearty laugh and she raised her purse in mock pose as if to strike before breaking out and laughing.

“You’re mean!” she said holding down her voice only because of where we were. “I can’t go around calling mature priests attractive, even if they are!” she said, as she feigned offense. I enjoyed hearing that comment very much.

I touched her hand and said to her in mock sympathy, “You just can’t help it!”

I knew that she was enjoying it just as much as I was. Whatever distance that might have been created by our twenty years apart was gone. We were the close friends that we always were. That’s the amazing thing about true friendship.

After a few more quiet moments, Elena spoke to me again.

“Jean, tell me what you were going to tell me about Sylvie.”

I felt hesitant all of a sudden. Still, I owed her an explanation, and in so telling might find out what had brought this on this sudden memory of a woman.

“Oh, yeah,” I replied, as my mind reverted back to that time and place. “I’m not sure why she came into my mind. I can tell you about what happened, though. I had thought Sylvie and I were going steady back then — you know, seeing each other exclusively. I know I was, even though nothing had really been said.”

I remember speaking slowly, feeling the emotions rise again within me.

“One night, I went over to my friend Jules’ house — you know, the rich guy who drove that Mercedes coupe even at university. He wasn’t a bad guy. In fact, he was one of my good friends; and, that was a cool car, I must say. I wonder where he is now? But I digress.”

"I thought he was kind of cute!" said Elena.

"Great, a cute guy with money coming back to haunt me again. Well, I went over to see him, you see, and I thought I saw a light on at his place, but nobody came to the door when I knocked. So, peeking into a window, I saw Sylvie in a very compromising position with Jules. I don't think I'll ever forget that sight. It didn't put me off women...just drove me to the monastery..."

I started to laugh through the memory, though it was still quite unpleasant to think of it. Having a sensation like that come up again in life means to me that there is still some work to be done to resolve it, or to let it go. I know now that it was about trust and my feelings for Elena coming to the fore had triggered something unresolved.

Elena looked serious and put her hand on mine.

"I'm sorry," she said softly to me. "I really am. You, of all people, didn't deserve that."

I smiled at her and felt her warmth and compassion. Strange what a relief it was to deal with this emotional scar, not quite healed, and particularly to be able to talk to a woman about it.

"I was sad...and very disappointed. But let me tell you one thing I did learn. I learned the role of victim then and there, and I played it well, until I finally figured out that that role was hurting me a lot more than I was punishing anyone else. I had had a strong inkling during that period anyway that the religious life was for me. Not being involved with a woman helped. It all kind of worked out."

I felt relieved but still awkward. It was clear that being with Elena triggered something deep down within me, and that only some of it was about Sylvie. In recollection, I realized that perhaps I had had the need to convince myself subconsciously that any relationship that might have continued between Elena and me after university would not have worked out. I had come to realize that I felt much more strongly about Elena than I had wanted to admit.

"Yes, it did. It really did," Elena responded with some feeling. "And I'm so glad we have reconnected."

I heard that last remark but I was distant. She noticed and I could tell that she was looking to change the subject. An animated look started to brighten her face.

"I didn't tell you, Jean, but that I do have another job. I call it a job, but for me, it's not really like work. I enjoy it so much and it is so different to my stained glass work, though they are both a bit intuitive. It involves healing. It has really come to fascinate me."

"That sounds interesting, Elena. Tell me more," I replied, breaking out of that unpleasant reverie. "Votive candles?" I half joked.

"Ha! Good guess! I happen to love votive candles — especially when they are sitting in some beautiful colored glass holders! But that's not it. Here's what happened. As I started to become more fascinated with spiritual things, I began to read a lot of the classic spiritual literature. I read some Christian classics like *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola* and St. Augustine's *Confessions*; but, I also really enjoyed reading and thinking outside my Christian upbringing and reading other spiritual classics that maybe you've heard of or read, like *Cosmic Consciousness* by Richard Bucke and the *Tao Te Ching* by Lao-Tzu — I just love that one. I also love some of the Hindu literature like the Bhagavad Gita, and discovered its wonderful interpretation by Paramahansa Yogananda. Magic. There was also a novel that I read at that time. It was called *The Clowns of God* by Morris West, a Christian author from Australia,

and it intimated things about spirit in the context of the modern world. I don't know why, but it was the perfect thing for me to read at the time. Then, I reread the four Gospels several times.

"Surprising, as least to me, was how much I then began to appreciate them. I'll bet you, Jean, like me, remember going to church all those Sundays with our parents as kids and adolescents and hearing the Gospel readings time and again. I didn't get much out of it at the time and I must admit that I wasn't very interested in any of that after school. Well, I decided to reread them.

"One thing I really noticed as I reread them was that so much in the Gospels concerns Jesus' acts of healing. I had never registered much about that aspect of Jesus. I was just fascinated with how often He was healing someone or He was talking about healing. I found it remarkable and somehow consoling. It also came at a time when the concept of healing and my involvement in it was growing stronger inside of me."

She had a point. Healing plays a most important role in the Gospels. It was something that I had thought about quite a bit over the years, too. Why hadn't the Church put that aspect of Christ's life more to the forefront? I'm not sure. The Church may have been more interested in emphasizing the fact that He performed miracles — perhaps to establish Christ's divinity — than what the miracles accomplished. Often, they were acts of healing.

Elena continued with her history.

"I began to feel more and more drawn to healing. I really loved the idea of being able to do that for others. And I have always felt, right from the beginning until this very

day, that aiding in the healing of another person helps the 'healer' in untold ways, too. We receive by giving and by being the conduit for healing. I know now because that is the other job I was telling you about. I practice a healing technique called applied kinesiology. I get paid to do it and that helps me support my art and live a 'normal' life, but honestly, Jean, I think I would do it for free. One day, if I'm ever in a position to do that, I will."

Her enthusiasm for this was contagious. I think my interest in what she was doing showed, as did my surprise at what she had learned. As a man of the cloth, I could not have said any of it better than she did about Jesus. She had indeed come a long way since our college days.

"I really didn't expect to hear anything like that from you, Elena," I told her, my surprise no doubt showing, "but I think it is fantastic! Your healing does seem to be like another art. They do talk about the 'healing arts.' I've only heard about kinesiology from Brother Luc here, but I must say that I really am ignorant on the subject. Can you tell me what it is all about?"

"Well, Jean, in a nutshell, applied kinesiology is a therapy based on interrogating the body about the truths it holds about a person. The idea is that the body registers and stores what happens to a person emotionally. Emotional energies can, however, become locked or 'blocked' in the body, which ultimately affects a person physically or mentally or emotionally and it manifests often in damaging ways. With applied kinesiology, we uncover and explore all of those held long-held emotions, unblocking and unlocking them, as it were. This brings a release, which helps a person rid himself of any difficulties he has experienced as a result of them.

"The body's energy system is a complicated one, but there's a flow to it," she continued. "If something blocks that flow of energy, it can cause a dis-ease. The energy systems we work with are the chakra system that you may have heard of, which is a series of energy centers in the body identified by the early Indian savants, and the meridians, the paths of energy up and down the body that are such a part of Chinese medicine and treatment, like acupuncture.

“For example,” she continued, “you know all of those old expressions we’ve grown up with like red with rage, green with envy, yellow with cowardice? That’s where it gets interesting. Each chakra corresponds to a color, and it’s amazing how they in turn correspond to those various emotional energies, like the ones I just mentioned.”

While this therapy was pretty new to me, the idea that illness is derived from our emotional points de faiblesse, fragilities and stresses in our outlooks and our attitudes that become transmuted into our bodies, made sense to me. I think we can all see time and time again where that has been in evidence, within ourselves or with others.

“It often seems that a lot of that ‘primitive’ wisdom is loaded with insight,” I added. “How often do you practice?”

“I can see up to five people in a day, but usually it is about eight or nine a week, at least for right now. And that is probably enough with the stained glass.”

“I wouldn’t mind trying this sometime with you. You might be really disappointed, though, with what you find there!” I joked.

“Yeah — I’ve always wanted to get into the head of a priest! You’d be a great subject. Just off the wall enough to be very interesting!”

I rolled my eyes and then we got up to take another stroll around the orchard. I could see that she continued to enjoy just soaking in the atmosphere of the place and the beauty of the grounds.

“I have become very attached to Kervenec,” she said. “There seems to be a palpable feeling of peace here.”

She then told me that her sensitivity to the various energies around her had grown dramatically as she had developed her applied kinesiology skills.

We took a seat again as we found another bench further on and she closed her eyes. I thought of the connection we had had and now felt once again. Even with all the changes we had had since university, our relationship had picked up right where it had left off. We could talk about anything. I kept thinking, too, about how Elena had evolved so much in these intervening years. Hers had not been an easy path.

I was feeling things that I hadn’t felt in years. I liked it, but I also felt an unease, one that I did not try to ignore, but to reason with. I could reason that it was right for me to be interested in and enjoy the company of a dear friend who happened to be a lovely woman, one whose multifaceted personality was complementary to my own, but I was still uneasy in some way. I sensed there might be some thin ice out there somewhere, waiting for me, that I was rushing towards and choosing to ignore.

Elena opened her eyes eventually and then turned to me with what I can only describe as a very affectionate look, a look of friendship, yes, but also a look that said more than that, a look of tender feeling. She was radiant. It was then that I suspected that there was something beginning to stir in her as well.

We sat quietly for several more minutes and then Elena took out her phone. She didn’t have a lot of time, I knew.

“Jean, sorry, I’m going to have to go. I have an appointment to keep and I know that you have your things to do, too. But I loved coming back here to see you again. I promise to come back soon, if you’ll have me!”

We stood and I gave her a little hug around the shoulders.

"I'll take that as a 'yes!'" she exclaimed.

We soon reached the abbey gate leading towards her car. Time had flown. I couldn't help but watch her motions, feminine but very assured. "What a wonderful person" was the thought that went through my mind.

"Thank you for your time, Jean. This was such a lovely visit. I know that your time is precious and you welcoming me here means a lot to me. I do appreciate you and your friendship so much."

She gave me a kiss on the cheek and got in behind the wheel. I remember that lovely fresh smell as she brushed up against me. As she backed out, she gave a little wave through the window. Then, she was gone.

I felt her leaving keenly. Something was happening inside of me. Feelings were growing. I was getting into trouble — my intuition was telling me — would I listen?