

Spirituality



"Airports become giant monastic cells where I can read, draw and mind my own business: the business of *lectio divina* and *visio divina* rolled into one happy hour of prayerful present moment bliss," writes Oblate of St. Francis de Sales Br. Mickey McGrath. Here is a detail of one of his sketches. (Mickey McGrath)



by Mickey McGrath

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As someone who travels often for work, I spend a lot of time in airports waiting for early morning flights. And when I have a sketchbook with me, I fill those present moments by drawing and sipping a cup of hot black coffee. There is always something or someone worthy of my prayerful attention for 20 or 30 minutes to help me overcome boredom, impatience and my addiction to sudoku puzzles. Airports become giant monastic cells where I can read, draw and mind my own business: the business of *lectio divina* and *visio divina* rolled into one happy hour of prayerful present moment bliss.

During my novitiate year almost 50 years ago, I realized I was put on earth to be a combination of brother and artist — not a priest, as I had originally thought when I first entered the novitiate. In those days, 30 minutes of morning meditation in the chapel began promptly at 6:30 a.m. That was the rule, and being obediently present, on time and in cassock, seemed more important than how we actually filled that half hour with prayer. "Keep the rule and the rule will keep you" was a mantra back in the day — one I happily ignored. (Rules are stifling; prayer is exhilarating.)

Fortunately, I had a very wise novice director who was perfectly fine with me writing in my prayer journal as a way to reflect on my devotional reading during meditation time. Journaling allowed me to organize my inspirations and use the present moments creatively and meditatively. For me, the written word evolves quite naturally into the illuminated word, and *lectio divina* (divine reading) flows into *visio divina* (sacred seeing).



Br. Mickey McGrath once had the opportunity to sketch in impressionist artist Claude Monet's legendary garden in Giverny, France. (Mickey McGrath)

[St. Francis de Sales](#) said: "Open your soul to peace in the morning and recall it throughout the day." No matter where or when I sketch, whether in a busy airport or a beautiful retreat setting, I am opening my soul to peace in the moment. Even watching the world spring to life from my screened-in porch at home in Camden can be a beautiful thing. I pray with a peaceful but heavy heart when I observe and sketch people passing by with large trash bags or shopping carts filled with their worldly belongings. On several occasions, when they have stopped at the kitchen

door for a cup of coffee, I have asked if I may sketch them. I have never been turned down. They strike a pose and in those fear-free moments of sketching, they remind me that the Body of Christ is bigger — and for me, more beautiful — than any elaborately gold-plated monstrance can contain.

Years ago, shortly after my Dad died, I fell in love with [St. Thérèse of Lisieux](#) when I learned that she loved to paint and used that gift following her own father's death to decorate a chasuble depicting his face as the face of the suffering Christ. She taught me that grief-centered present moments are charged with the healing power of creativity. Therese also wrote poems and plays and kept a journal of her memories and inspirations, even as tuberculosis wracked her body with pain.

Thomas Merton — who also loved Thérèse — had parents who were artists, so it was in his DNA to appreciate visual art as well as poetry, jazz music and Eastern mysticism. Merton, inspired by Buddhist contemplative practices, created Japanese brush drawings as part of his morning prayer routine. Sometimes abstract, sometimes figurative, these lovely ink drawings ushered him into the present moment and led by the Holy Spirit into uncharted territories within. Mystical life is all about the journey, not the destination; about discovering God in internal freedom, not external rules. And some of my favorite mystical BFFs, like Thérèse and Merton, used pens and paintbrushes to get to that momentary place of inner peace.

Art enables
us to
find ourselves
and lose
ourselves
at the SAME
TIME.
MERTON

Br. Mickey McGrath considers Thomas Merton one his "favorite mystical BFFs."
(Mickey McGrath)

But it isn't just the great saints and mystics who have taught me to live in the present moment since those novitiate days so long ago; great artists have done their share of mentoring me as well. The great impressionist painter [Claude Monet](#), who lived at the same time as Thérèse, once said, "What keeps my heart awake is colorful silence." Imagine my thrill several years ago at the grace-filled opportunity to sketch in his legendary garden in [Giverny](#): water lily pads floating serenely under Japanese foot bridges; bright blue water reflecting the sunny sky above; rowboats

which he used first thing every morning — as a nearly blind 90-year old man — to clip and trim the weeds and overhanging branches of his artfully planned garden. The beautiful colors of silence which he tended so lovingly in countless present moments still inspire us a century later.

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Now also imagine my chagrin at the irony of encountering a woman seated on a bench, feverishly texting on her cellphone in this earthly garden of heavenly delight. She reminded me of the bored and lonely travelers I witness in crowded airports, desperately searching for distraction and entertainment. Over the years I have come to see that most people in every airport terminal are on cellphones — talking, texting, reading or playing games — doing anything to distract from silently, colorfully immersing themselves in sacred present moments that will never pass this way again.

Lest you think I am being too holier-than-thou, I must admit that when I have finished sketching in the present moment, I often take out my cellphone to enjoy some relaxing rounds of sudoku puzzles. My left-brain, logical side needs attention too — just not too much.

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