

A
Vision Quest Tale
by
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EPISODE EIGHT
MOVING FORWARD
TO A RETREAT

It was January, in the year 1956. At the age of eighteen, while serving in the US military in the Philippines, I seemed to have burned myself out by having too much physical fun. The cost of energy used that these activities demanded began to take a toll on me.

Even so, this wasn't a physical burnout as much as it was a mental one. I was starting to care less about continuing hedonistic activities and found myself not enjoying them as much as I did just a few months ago. This so-called fun-stuff ran the entire late-teen spectrum of drinking, sex, running about all night instead of sleeping, and eating just enough to keep me from starving or losing excessive weight. I had the idea in my head that eating and sleeping took me away from other fun activities. Thank God I had to work on the base during the day, or I probably would spend all of that time carousing around as well.

I gradually found myself not leaving the airbase and heading to the nearby Sodom and Gomorrah-like town of Angeles City as much as I had been doing. It had become a habit, if not an obsession, since I arrived in the Philippines, still at seventeen. All newbies got the same treatment, and you almost had to be a devoted Mormon boy to resist newbie treatment that the other guys on base were intent on delivering to you. They had all been through it when they first arrived at the airbase and were determined to throw you into the same whirlpool of wanton youth activities. But at least I learned to swim in it quickly.

It's a well-known fact that a teenage human male in the process of maturing is a little like a cat on the prowl. You can throw them into an unholy mess, and they usually end up landing on their feet somehow. But somewhere embedded within their consciousness, a young man will sense warning flares going off. They feel that what they are doing is not all that good for them. Many harmful things can feel wonderful and give a fellow his bragging rights. His ego is then unquestionably massaged, but his consciousness is beginning to understand that it is also being abused. It often takes a while to understand this, but eventually, it surfaces, and he looks for solutions. That is if he's smart enough.

I was that young man in crisis, and the alarms were going off. A sense of preservation was beginning to kick in, but a solution was not evident to me at that moment. Fortunately, I came down with a venereal disease, easily treated but not accepted. I also felt a little sick, which didn't exactly go with the VD, but the combined effect made me rest and recover. I decided to stay away from Angeles for a while. Oddly enough, I didn't mind it and kept extending my self-imposed R&R for several more weeks. I was suddenly eating more at the airbase mess hall,

which I had previously avoided. Every night, the enormous amounts of alcohol I was imbibing in Angeles City bars were replaced by a couple of beers with fellow airmen while watching outdoor movies and having great conversations.

Then one morning, I was having coffee in an outdoor mess with a couple of guys that I had met but didn't know all that well. We traveled in significantly different circles within the vast Clark Air Force base in those days. I found that these guys had never fallen into the newbie routine and were following their instincts. They enjoyed each other's company and had vigorous conversations about almost everything. Philosophy was a favorite subject and one that I had never been interested in. I was, however, an avid reader, at least before I found the randy lifestyle. I decided that I didn't want to be left out and went to the base library to see if I could improve my standing with these new friends.

Over time, instead of satisfying my libido and attempting to prove that I could outperform or at least perform as well as my fellow airmen, I found that I was pretty happy just being friends with these new guys, and I didn't miss the streets of Angeles at all. How strange! I thought to myself.

During most of these get-togethers, the subject was challenging, engaging, and satisfying. And that was crazy because we rarely ever went past the regular two beer meetings. I soon realized that there was no price to pay for male friends to have get-togethers. I found that I was having fun and liked the people. And I was learning a lot.

One evening, several weeks after the first meeting I attended, one of the guys brought up the subject of religion. I don't know why, because we had sort of made a policy of avoiding religion and politics, which made sense. He said that he was a Roman Catholic and a member of the Holy Name Society, and he had decided to opt-in on a Catholic Retreat in the mountains in Baguio. I was not too familiar with this location but did know that it was quite a long way to the north of our base. I was intrigued and went to the Base library to learn more about the place. The village was over 4,800 feet high in elevation and was far more alpine in feeling than tropical. This climate was unusual for the Philippines.

My Catholic friend's name was Stan. I told him that I was interested in joining him on this scheduled Retreat. I also told him that I was not sure why. He told me that it didn't matter why or how intense the why of it was. Just the desire to follow through on the urge was enough. I signed up for the Retreat, and then I peppered him with all manner of questions about what this Closed Retreat was all

about and what I could look forward to. He did his best to get me informed but suggested that I just let it happen. He said that new experiences are always best when you just let it flow into and around you.

I asked him if we would be rooming together at the Baguio Retreat. He told me that we would not, and would not talk with one another or anyone else until the week-long Retreat was over. I was stunned as the image of not being able to speak to anyone began to sink into my awareness.

The morning to depart for Baguio arrived, and we were all getting on a small charter bus and leaving Clark Airbase for the mountains in Northern Luzon. There were about eight airmen on board, and other than Stan, I didn't recognize anyone. The trip to Baguio was very scenic and would have been reason enough to take this trip. I sat with Stan, and because the Retreat had not yet started, we were able to talk to one another. I worked very hard to get as much information from Stan about what we would experience during the Retreat. After a short stop to have lunch, we went on and arrived in Baguio mid-afternoon.

We drove up to a large building. It reeked of monastic impressiveness. It was not my idea of Philippine architecture, and it seemed to be far more European than I would have expected. I had noticed the vegetation along the sides of the road leading to this place were getting less and less tropical, and the gardens surrounding this monastery were far more pine tree-ish in appearance than I would have guessed. I found that I liked it a lot, if only for the uniqueness of the surroundings.

We got off the charter bus, walked up a long flight of steep stairs, and entered the monastery. We found ourselves in a large, relatively dark hallway. Most of the dim light in this space was from the small windows, but quite a few torches were burning. I suddenly felt that I was inside a movie set for a medieval religious film. I hadn't expected this.

As we gathered into the center of the entrance hall, a man walked in dressed in a brown robe, a corded sash around his middle, and a piece of cloth that I later found out was called a scapula. And, of course, he had on leather sandals. Now, this was a monk from central casting, I thought. He did not identify himself, so I decided to think of him as the Host Monk.

He greeted us by saying that the Retreat was in session and that there would be no more talking by any of us until told that the closed part of the Retreat was

over on the last day. We were to follow him to our rooms. The Host Monk or one of the brothers would be letting us know what to do for the rest of the week.

We followed this Host Monk out of the entry hall and into another long hallway that seemed not to have an end to it. This hall was dismal but had a few small windows that allowed light to enter, like the entry hall. It seemed cold but was not low in temperature. It just seemed damp and cool on an emotional level. We arrived at our rooms one by one and left the group. We all looked at each other with the same questioning eyes. Everyone realized that we were in a different world now. We were not exactly scared, but the uncertainty coupled with the austere surroundings had deposited us into an uncertain existence.

The room emanated a sparseness of the highest degree possible. I had not expected a five-star hotel, but this was simplicity set to a very low level. I didn't think I would have imagined a place like this before actually seeing it. It was not more than 7 feet by 7 feet at the largest and had one small high window near the top of the room. One single-sized bed on a wooden frame with a central board stood across the room from the door. A thin mattress and pillow with white sheets and a pillowcase were neatly folded and stacked near the bed's bottom. A large, heavy-looking thick wooden crucifix was attached to the wall above the bed. I had images of *The Exorcist* movie darting about in my mind for some stupid reason.

The Host Monk also indicated a hook on the wall that held an even more simple version of the robe, sash, and scapula than the one he had on. There was also a pair of sandals on the floor under the clothing. Obviously, I was going to become a mini-monk while I was here. The Host Monk then turned and left without a word or a gesture.

I walked to the bed and touched the sheets. They had been dried on a clothesline in the outside air, as they had a fresh stiffness to them that you can't get from a clothes dryer. I shrugged and thought that I could live with this for a week, but I wasn't sure why I should live with this in the first place. I was beginning to long for the diversions of Angeles City.

I didn't hear from anyone for over two hours, and after just sitting on the bed I tried to think. I ended up thinking about nothing and decided to lie down and take a nap. I made the bed, dressed the pillow, and laid down on my board-bed. I just started to drift into a dream state when I heard a rap-rap on the door. I got up and opened it to find the Host Monk standing there. I started to say something and saw him look with steely eyes at me and hold his finger to his mouth. He indicated that

I was to dress in the robe and sandals provided and then motioned with his head to follow him.

We walked for several minutes, walking down the dim hallway, and then entered what looked pretty much like a minimalist dining hall. Here again, everything in this room was simple to the core. A quick count indicated that there were almost twenty people in the room, and as far as I could see, the seven airmen I came here with were all in attendance. There were no women in this gathering.

I saw Stan at the table, and there was an empty chair next to him. I walked there and sat down next to him. It seemed strange not to say hello or anything else. I just nodded to him, and he nodded back. Not talking was more challenging work than I would have imagined. Even the servers and other people that I assumed were not on a closed retreat were making an effort to stay quiet. I could see priests and other monks in the hall watching everyone. I had the impression that something severe might happen if anyone even so much as coughed. Nobody did.

Then, other male monks, dressed in simple clothing served food, and they were as severe and quiet as possible. I was beginning to get into the mood for this Retreat, if not it's reasoning. No one had said a word to us after the initial greeting by the Host Monk. This meal was flavorful enough but extremely minimal in selection and amount.

We somehow all rose in the dining hall together at a given point and followed our Host Monk into a large room full of tables, chairs, and books. We were obviously in a monastic library. The Host Monk, assisted by other monks, guided us to various tables and chairs. There was a printed form lying on the table in front of each chair. This form told us what we were to expect during this Retreat and suggested that we select books relevant to each faith or interest. There was a statement that we would have a lot of time to devote ourselves to reading and contemplating our existence during this Retreat. If we were not readers, we should not worry but place ourselves into a mindset to think, consider and pray. Meditation, the list suggested, could be just as effective as reading if we establish our thoughts in a place where questions would originate in our consciousness and answers would return into our consciousness. I thought about all of this and decided that I would do both. I loved reading, and I wasn't opposed to meditation either. It all made sense to me. I certainly agreed, and I was in a peaceful mind about the following few days' tasks.

The next three days set my Retreat routine in motion. I went to bed each night at eight on my sheet-covered board-bed. The sheets were getting less ridged each night, and that suited me. The crucifix above the bed effectively demanded that I enter a proper frame of mind. I barely laid down when I drifted into a meditative world where I let my consciousness do its thing. I would ask a question, get an answer, and then drift into a sleep state. When I woke up precisely at five o'clock in the morning, I found that I had the answer to my question firmly embedded into my awake consciousness. This routine was very satisfying.

After heading to the public bathroom down the hallway, I returned to my room to finish my morning cleanups. And then, like clockwork, a monk would arrive at my door, issue a modest rap-rap, and I would head to the dining hall. We had a regular minimalist meal each time. Neither Stan nor I bothered to sit together anymore because there was little need as no one could talk or had anything to say at this point.

After finishing breakfast, everyone headed to the library, their room, or outside the gardens. I always went to the gardens.

These mountainside gardens were lovely, extensive and I would have to say they felt somehow very holy. Being located in the high mountains in Baguio, the landscape was always shrouded in the morning in what I first thought was fog. I later realized that the monastery site was in clouds during the morning and occasionally all day because of its elevation. The clouds generally lifted in the late morning, and the gardens benefitted from brilliant sunlight and blue skies by afternoon.

And of course, the morning garden air was also very crisp and quite chilly, and we were still running around in loose brown robes with no underwear and sandals. I would choose what had become my favorite stone bench, which always seemed to be available to me alone for my individual use. My butt would always get the immediate shock of sitting on this cold, damp bench, but I reminded myself that I was a novice monk for a week and would have to gladly endure any suffering offered as a form of Penance. This bench also provided what I believed to be the most beautiful scenery imaginable.

The boxwood hedges were close by my feet and issued their unique fresh green scent, as did the marigolds and roses. Other masses of mums, pansies, and petunias existed to give me pleasure. Further away, some hibiscus and bougainvillea vines were blooming amid the greenery, and further yet, I saw large

masses of sunflowers down the hill demanding their share of beautiful sunlight as the clouds lifted.

The vista beyond the gardens was spectacular, with the various mountains staking their claim within the overall panorama and with winding roads making their way through those mountainsides. And, as if they understood the need for silence, everything presented this dramatic scene without a sound.

However, some of God's creatures didn't care for the rules here. Birds were darting in and out of the shrubbery and flower masses. They were pretty free to issue their caws and tweets and chirps. But this was indeed nature's creation, and those sounds were more than welcome. They, like the entire garden, had become Holy to me.

On the fourth retreat day, I experienced something unusual or unusual in this not-so-usual place. I passed by Stan in the hallway as I headed to breakfast. I looked into his eyes at the exact second that he connected with mine. I received a shock of understanding that my friend was now on a different level of some kind than we had been before. I could tell by his facial expression that he had received the same understanding. We both smiled but continued towards our chosen destinations.

From that moment on, I felt this new recognition every time we met each other within the monastery or the gardens. Nothing could or needed to be said. We both recognized that we had connected on a soul level and not as a human being. It was different, and it was terrific. I think it was some essential kind of love. It was not a family type, romantic type, or any other possessive type of love, but one that all spiritual beings have for one another. I instinctively came to that realization, and I began to see it in the other individuals within this Retreat in whatever role they were playing within it. You knew you had a connection with all souls, but familiarization, at least in these cases, strengthened the feeling of that connection.

This new sensation of strengthening the relationship of everyone that I developed a connection with gave significantly special meaning to this religious Retreat. I wondered if it would hold after I left the Retreat.

Soon, another transformation, obviously instigated by spiritual persuasion, began to take shape. One morning while sitting on my stone bench in the garden and freezing my ass off, as usual, I began to detect a significant shifting like everything that was starting to take place. The colors of all the flowers began to

vibrate and intensify. And the shrubbery was becoming ever more green than I have seen it before. The scents from the flowers, the leaves, and the soil began to permeate my entire body and not just my nostrils. This alteration of nature did not cause me any distress.

On the contrary, I grew more excited in seeing, feeling, and understanding what was happening around me. I also understood that I was not seeing anything new. But I was demonstrating that all things are vibrational. I was internally showing that I could alter that vibration and sense a positive transformation if I cared to do so.

I decided to enjoy this new ability until I understood what I saw. Then I returned to the vibrational level that I found comfortable for my current needs. Interesting!

Stan was walking down the pathway, and as he passed me, he nodded and smiled. I understood that he knew what I had just experienced without us having to have a conversation about it. That was a neat trick, and I hoped I would retain that super-empathic ability with Stan and perhaps others.

Everything returned to normal, and after my butt returned to normal as well, I went back to enjoying the view and meditating. It was a quiet morning, and other than Stan walking by, I saw no other people.

My eyes were fixated on the center, from my viewpoint, of the distant mountain vista. Rather than any one element of this magnificent view predominating, I visually created a nexus that connected every aspect of the panorama as one feature. And then, in the center of that nexus, a bright shimmering dot emanated and began to glow. From that brilliant pinpoint, a bright silver circle began to form, and from that expanding sphere, a human figure was flying towards me at a breakneck pace. And then, before I could rationalize in my mind what I was seeing, a man with bright white wings and dressed in radiant blue pants, but no shirt, was standing before me on the pebble pathway.

Without him saying a word or, better yet, making any vocal sound, he greeted me within my mind and asked me if he could join me here on the bench. Even though I didn't know how this meeting was occurring, I replied that there wasn't room for him to sit on the bench. Suddenly the bench widened to accommodate someone or something else. I just scooted over, and he folded his wings and sat down next to me. I was alarmed to say the least.

Again, even with no audible issuance or lip movements coming from this apparition, I understood him to say, "This is a great view, isn't it, Mark?"

In return, somehow, I replied without talking. "Yes!" But then I added. "Are we supposed to be talking? This is supposed to be a closed retreat. And how did you know my name?"

He answered. "You and the other solids here are the ones that shouldn't be talking because you don't want or need the distractions of constant yapping to keep you focused here in this Realm. This silence factor makes it possible for you to hear me, or even see me, for that matter. And technically, you are not exactly talking right now. I would rather say that you are thinking. Oh Yes! And as to how I know your name, I know almost everything about you."

I thought that over for a second and sent another thought to him. "Why are you referring to me as a solid? For that matter, what do you mean by being in a Realm? It's disconcerting to think you know everything about me. And I want to know your name if we are going to be fair about all this."

"I don't have a name, but I can make up one for you, Mark. Let's see. How about Justice? That has a nice sound to it. And as far as calling you a solid, I have to tell you that you are all solids here in this Realm because you are functioning in an Obstructed Universe. A lot of what goes on in this Universe is quite solid, including those parts that don't seem particularly solid. So you, as a solid entity, are always bumping into many other solid things while you are here. That's the kind of Realm you exist in at present. When you leave here, after death as you understand it, you will go directly to an Unobstructed Realm or Universe that we call a Transition Realm, where nothing is solid, and you don't bump into anything, except of course, for the thoughts of other souls." He hesitated a bit and then went on.

"In that Transition Realm, you will review your previous life experiences and make a decision where you must go when you leave the Transition Realm. That is determined by how much and how well you have learned from your previous experiences or reincarnations. And how you have evolved as a soul because of it."

I was amazed and somewhat confused over this apparition named Justice and wondered why he was appearing to me while sitting on a cold stone bench in the mountains of Baguio. So I asked him. "What are you? Are you an Angel or

perhaps an etheric teacher sent in to instruct me in some manner? And is this something the Catholic Church has arranged for us because we are on a Closed Retreat?"

He gave me a very light but quite sprightly laugh, and he replied." No, I'm not an Angel, but I am training to become one. I have a long way to go yet, though. I am also not a teacher, but maybe that's not right either because we are always teaching when we give another soul a new idea. And I can assure you that the Catholic Church didn't arrange for me to be here. They are well-meaning, but I suspect that they wouldn't like the idea of me sitting here with you on this cold bench and interrupting your Retreat. Nor would they like this to take place in this monastery in particular because the Church owns this place, and they always like to determine what goes on in areas or with people they feel that they own." He robustly laughed at this point but then went on.

"I'm here because you wanted me to be here, or perhaps someone like me to visit you, during your spiritual meditations. Don't you remember when you thought about how you wanted to elevate your spiritual thoughts during meditation? You asked for some help at those times, but perhaps you didn't know it. In any case, I am here to give you a wake-up call and perhaps give you a few introductory lessons in the process. But it is really up to you how far you will take this introduction. You can run with it or ignore it. Whatever you wish."

I answered him with a dumb question. "So you're saying that this Closed Retreat has nothing to do with your appearance?"

"I didn't say that either, Mark. The fact that you wanted guidance in this matter and that you decided to embark on this Closed Retreat is a prime consideration that led to all this. You could have done it in any number of ways. Many people choose Transcendental Meditation or go on a spiritual Vision Quest. Some even perform the Camino de Santiago trek in Spain, which takes a spiritual path or Retreat to jump-start their spiritual growth. There are many other similar means and methods to which you can devote. Any action that allows you to focus both spiritual inwardness and outwardness on finding pathways to your inner spirit and individual spiritual consciousness is fine. You chose a Roman Catholic Closed Retreat this time, and it worked just fine for you, don't you think?"

I answered that I did indeed think that I was glad that I came to this Retreat. It liberated my mind more than ever before, and I was pleased about that. Justice

smiled and put his arm around me as we sat on the stone bench and gazed out over the distant and beautiful mountain view.

He then looked at me and said, "Well, my friend, I think that it is time for me to leave you to your Retreat chores and some more good Meditation. I haven't given you a lot of facts to chew over in your mind, but I'm sure that you will be able to wriggle out of the solidness of your existence for a bit and to think about what comes next.

"And here is a final colossal secret for you. As you think, so you are going to become. If your mind is preoccupied with small, petty things, you pretty much know what the results will be for you.

"A Spiritual Guru of mine, known by the name of Tiber, created a formula that he called the Four Crowns of Creative Endeavors. It would help if you tried to remember these four Crowns. He called this method the IWEB.

"The first Crown is Imagination, for without having it, you would never know when or how to start the creative process.

"The second Crown is Willpower, which when used wisely sends you into the direction you will need to go to accomplish or obtain something.

The third Crown is Effort, perhaps the hardest of the four crowns. It would help if you used Effort as hard and as prolonged as necessary to cause your creations to manifest themselves.

And the fourth and final Crown is Belief. The soul often wants to conjure up a creation but aborts the Effort before it is ready to manifest because they lack the impetus to keep it going, or perhaps better said, did not believe in it enough. Without Belief in what you are trying to accomplish, it is pretty hard to reach your goals."

I was impressed with this IWEB idea and told Justice. "I have the feeling that this is one of the most important ideas I have ever heard. I will work on it."

"Then you will succeed for sure, and my work here will be successful. If you and I both feel that you need me again, I will return, but you must deal with your goals on your own, to whatever degree that you are able.

And with that, Justice gave me one final big enveloping hug and reversed the shimmering emanation that he arrived here with, raised his wings, and instantly flew back to a point far away in the mountains.

And just as that happened, my friend, Stan, passed by me on his way back along the garden path, nodded and smiled. I once again understood that he knew a little of what I had just experienced without us having to have a conversation about it. I couldn't wait to tell him details about it when the Retreat was over.

I took up the rest of the retreat days with the routine of meditating while strolling the garden pathways, sitting on my chilly bench for hours at a time, silently eating with the other retreaters, and sleeping on my board-bed under the giant demanding wooden crucifix. Living as a mini-monk was nice enough for a week, but I knew I never, ever wanted to become one permanently.

Then came the last day of this Closed Retreat. The Host Monk joined us in the dining hall and shocked us by booming in a loud bass voice. "This Closed Retreat is ended!" He then turned and walked away.

I would have thought that everyone in the dining hall would start talking all at once, but that is not what happened. At first, no one said anything at all, and when some did start talking, the sentences were short and quiet. It only took a week of the closed Retreat, and silence had become the norm.

Stan was sitting at the far end of the dining room, and he walked over to me and offered me a hug, which I returned gratefully. He said nothing, and neither did I.

For the next hour, the Host Monk introduced other monks and priests to give short talks about what this Retreat should have presented to all of us. They all offered admonitions about supporting the Catholic Church when we returned home. And finally, the Archbishop of the Philippines gave closing remarks to us and offered to speak to each individual who may have questions or comments of any kind. I thought of how nice this was for such a high-ranking prelate to provide this to us. I took him up on this offer and scheduled a meeting with him in the late afternoon.

It didn't end all that well for me. I had several questions about the rules and methodology of the Church, and his answers didn't satisfy me. He knew it because his tone of voice went from being very saintly to quite officious by the time the

meeting was over. I was mystified about this as I thought I had sailed through this Retreat as a relatively pious mini-monk.

When we left the monastery, I noticed that the vocal interaction on the charter bus was beginning to return to the same loud level that we had arrived here with. I, of course, sat next to Stan, and we started the process of filling each other in what we had experienced during the Retreat.

We had made arrangements to stop into and meet the Pink Sisters Of Perpetual Adoration. Their convent was located just outside Baguio on our road back to the airbase. Its interior was quite beautiful and seemed to radiate a soft pink tone everywhere. All the nuns dressed in pink robes. They were devoted to perpetual prayers as their goal and lifestyle. They spent eight hours to prayers for the world and all of the people in it. Then eight hours to perform church tasks and finally eight hours to sleep and meditation. They did not talk to visitors, but we obtained exemptions due to our previous 'mini-monk' status.

This meeting was a wonderful and meaningful event for all of us. The nuns, many of them Americans, had been in this Church all through World War II. We were allowed to talk to them through a delicate thin silver metal ornate semi-open screen that separated us from the primary church seating and alter and the nuns. I told one of those beautiful, serene nuns about our Retreat's importance for me. I also told her about my meeting with Angel-To-Be Justice. She seemed pleased to hear this. Then I told her about the less extraordinary session with the Archbishop. She nodded, smiled at me, and said, "Go With God, but always remember your meeting with the Angel-To-Be, Justice was an important one." She then smiled and left our short meeting.

That ended my Roman Catholic Closed Retreat. This Retreat took place many decades ago, but I remember it all very well to this day, over sixty years later. I have faced many spiritual challenges during that time and called upon my friend Justice from time to time. I have climbed up and fallen down the ladder of spiritual progress during the years, but I will never forget that week in the mountains of Baguio.

