

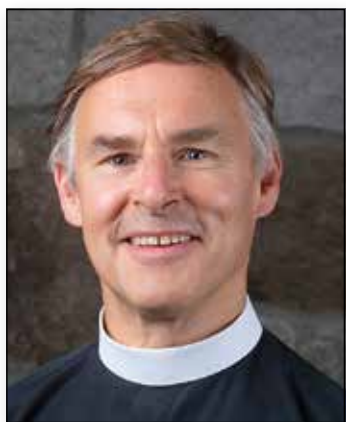
THE CALL

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Christian Meditation and Seeing God in the Ordinary

Insights from Thomas Keating



The Rev. Adrian Robbins-Cole

THE THEME OF THIS SUMMER'S edition of *The Call* is "Ordinary Time; Extraordinary Faith." As I thought about the theme, it immediately reminded me of a retreat I attended several years ago at a convent in Maryland. This retreat had a lasting impact on the way I experience the extraordinary presence of God in the ordinary moments of life. The focus of the retreat was on the practice of Christian meditation with a particular reference to the teachings of Fr. Thomas Keating who was responsible for the reintroduction of the practice of Christian meditation into the life of the contemporary church in this country.

If you are not familiar with Christian meditation, it differs from other forms of prayer in that it does not focus on words, petitions, or structured dialogue. Instead, it is a practice of silent communion with God, often facilitated by methods such as centering prayer, a form of meditation popularized by Keating. In his book *Open Mind, Open Heart*, Keating describes centering prayer as a means of consenting to God's presence and action within us. By sitting in silence and letting go of our thoughts, we create space for God to reveal Him/Herself beyond our mental distractions and worldly concerns.

Now you may be wondering what Christian meditation has to do with seeing God in the ordinary events of life? In fact, you might be thinking that the practice of sitting in silence before God seems more about removing oneself from the hustle and bustle of ordinary life. However, what Keating argues is that Christian meditation is a profound spiritual practice that invites believers into a deeper awareness of God's presence in everyday life. Rooted in the ancient contemplative traditions of the Church, this form of prayer fosters an interior stillness that allows us to perceive

the divine not only in grand spiritual experiences but also in the seemingly mundane moments of life.

Keating argued that one of the greatest spiritual challenges is recognizing God's presence in the ordinary rhythms of life. We often seek Him in dramatic revelations or mystical experiences, yet fail to perceive Him in the small, simple moments—our morning routines, conversations with loved ones, or the beauty of nature. Keating's teachings encourage us to move beyond this limited perception and embrace the sacramentality of everyday life. In *The Mystery of Christ*, Keating explains that everything in creation can serve as a window into God's presence if we cultivate a contemplative awareness. The morning sunlight streaming through a window, the laughter of a child, or the quiet presence of a friend can all.

On my retreat at the convent, one of the more strange and unexpected activities we undertook in between our sessions of silent prayer, were "mindful walks" in nature. This consisted of us walking very slowly and deliberately along a path in a garden in the courtyard of the monastery stopping to look at each flower, leaf and tree we encountered, so that we

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could appreciate the wonder of the divine in the created order around us. We also engaged in "contemplative meals." Instead of wolfing down our food as we chatted or watched TV, this practice involved eating in silence, savoring with deliberation every mouthful of food we ate, and waiting in silence, enjoying what we had just eaten before eating another morsel. Eating would only begin, after we had spent some minutes contemplating and appreciating the food on the

plate in front of us. These "contemplative meals" were yet another way to train us to see the extraordinary in the ordinary.

I hope this summer you have new experiences of seeing God in the ordinary events of your life!

Yours in Christ,



Warden's Letter

When Ordinary Becomes Extraordinary



Ginny Snow, warden

I arrived at the pond around 2pm, the height of sun and heat, tied on the florescent pink buoy, and waded in. When halfway across, I paused to get my bearings, floated on my back, and took in the deep blue summer sky—perfection. Once on the other side, sitting on a dock alone in nature, gratitude filled me—for all my blessings and for God's place in my life. I closed my eyes and, in the moment, that ordinary summer day became extraordinary.

Slowing down, being alone and present in nature are acts of faith for me. Whether swimming, hiking or gazing at the moon—I am in awe, my faith is reinforced, and I feel most connected to God. I am reminded of Matthew 11:28-29:

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

This summer, I'm going to try to pay more attention when my ordinary days become extraordinary. Chances are, I'll be taking in nature when it happens. What do you do to slow down and become present? And how do your ordinary days become extraordinary?

FOR THE PAST 15 YEARS, since living in Wellesley, one of my summer traditions is swimming across Sherborn's Farm Pond and back (a 40-minute round-trip). Last July, there was a cloudless day with light wind and the temperature about 80°, a perfect swim day. Our oldest daughter, Charlotte, who often accompanied me on my swim outings, was away and I did my best to recruit a friend to join me but had no luck. I hesitate to swim alone. What if I got a leg cramp or disrupted a snapping turtle? One friend was adamant that if I went ahead with a solo swim, I should borrow her swim buoy. I thought, yes, this will work.



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Extraordinary Grace; Unexpected Face?



The Rev. Margaret K. Schwarzer

SUMMER AND MUCH OF the fall—all the days after Pentecost until Advent—are “ordinary time.” We Christians are meant to “keep on keeping on” amidst the ordinary gifts and challenges of life. However, summer sets itself apart when vacation days are anticipated, and nature becomes abundant again. In New England, everything wakes up after a harsh winter, offering beauty, freshness, and lush textures. It is hard not to be delighted by it all.

In his epistle, James says, “draw nearer to God, and God will draw nearer to you.” That is how I feel about the lavish reality of summer flowers, leafing trees, blue sky, bracing ocean water. If we want to be awed by creation, participation is the answer: walk, hike, swim, sail. There are gentle ways to participate, too: quiet walks, stargazing, dipping only toes into ocean or lake water. We can take it all in by immersing ourselves in it. Draw nearer to creation, and creation will draw nearer to you.

In 1225, St. Francis asked us to recognize nature’s shared heritage with us in his “Canticle of the Sun.” He sings the praises of “Brother Sun, Sister Moon, Brother Wind, and Sister Water.”

I also turn to modern poems, frequently a few Mary Oliver poems, to remind myself of the extraordinary summer creation waiting for us when we take time to engage it. Nature rises to meet us as a mutual companion. I find kinship with the natural world reignited with Mary Oliver’s poem “The Hermit Crab.”

I have stood where she stands in this poem and glimpsed something meaningful (but hard to put into words). Maybe you have, too.

The Hermit Crab (excerpt)

by Mary Oliver

Once I looked inside
the darkness
of a shell folded like a pastry
and there was a fancy face—
or almost a face—
it turned away
and frisked up its brawny forearms
so quickly
against the light
and my looking in
I scarcely had time to see it,
gleaming

My hope for each of us this summer is that we plunge into nature and find moments which “gleam.” We are part and parcel of God’s creation and (as writer and Presbyterian minister Fredrick Buechner liked to remind people), “life itself is grace.”



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Navigating the VUCA World

The Role of Gamification in Christian Education



The Rev. Dr. Sarah Robbins-Cole

ONE OF THE LOVELIEST things about summer is the sense that the season is inherently playful. There's a lightness to the air and an invitation to embrace joy, freedom, and creativity. In church school, we try to bring this same playfulness into the classroom, recognizing that learning about faith can also be fun. Gamification, the integration of game-like elements into education, helps capture that same energy, making lessons more engaging and memorable.

Occasionally, ideas in the wider church make me roll my eyes—especially those buzzwords that infiltrate many workplaces. Terms like “actionable,” “best practices,” “pivot,” and “paradigm shift” come to mind. While these words themselves aren't the problem, their overuse has made them increasingly irritating (at least to me). Two more terms I might have added to this list are “the VUCA world” and “gamification.” I first encountered

them in a leadership class while pursuing my doctorate, and I likely rolled my eyes at the time. But, as I reflect on my own experiences writing lesson plans, teaching confirmation classes, and planning youth group activities, I find these two terms more relevant than I could have imagined at that time.

So, what exactly do these terms mean, and why do they matter in Christian education? Let's start by examining the terms.

The VUCA World

Today, we are increasingly faced with the challenges of what's known as a “VUCA world”—an acronym for Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity. This concept, popularized by Bob Johansen, a leading futurist, highlights how rapid technological advancements, unpredictable events, and constant change shape our world. In a VUCA world, both adults and children face information overload and constant distractions. While older generations (myself included) might yearn for simpler times—when Sunday was for church and afternoons stretched on endlessly—it's clear that the past can't be recreated. However, we can find new ways to engage children in meaningful ways, especially in matters of faith and scripture. This is where gamification comes in.

What is Gamification?

Gamification refers to integrating game-like elements, such as

challenges, puzzles, trivia games, skits, and team building exercises, into educational contexts. Instead of lecturing on scripture, I might create a fast-paced “Name a Bible story or book” game, pausing to offer fun snippets of information. Or we might play “Charades for Sacraments.” I aim to keep things lighthearted, with no clear winners or losers, encouraging everyone to participate. I've been known to hand out prizes for the boldest wrong answers.

The goal of gamification is to entertain while also deepening students' connection to faith. When children actively participate in a game-like environment, they are more likely to retain the information because they engage multiple senses. Passive learning, like listening to a lecture, doesn't engage the brain the same way, making it harder for information to stick. Gamification also fosters camaraderie, building a sense of community as students work and learn together.

Gamification isn't just effective—it's also more fun for me as an educator. Designing lesson plans that incorporate games makes both teaching and learning more enjoyable. At the end of every lesson, when I ask what they liked best, children and youth almost always mention the game and the discussion that followed.



Photo: Peter B. Lull

Parishioner Reflections

Our Journey Through Ordinary Time

JOURNEYING THROUGH THE LITURGICAL SEASON of Ordinary Time, we are reminded that God's presence is anything but ordinary. This collection of articles invites us to experience grace in the

quiet rhythms of summer and to grow our faith with intention and hope. Our authors invite us to dive into the spirit of renewal even in the most ordinary of times.

The Challenge of Ordinary Time



Elmore Alexander

WE ARE NOW IN Ordinary Time, the longest liturgical period of the year. In one sense, that is quite appropriate—if “extraordinary” dominated our lives, it would not be “extraordinary.” Ordinary implies regular, nonspecial days. This poses an interesting question for our faith—What does it mean to be a Christian in ordinary times? It is easy to have faith in Advent’s celebration of Christ’s birth. The challenge to look inward and examine faith during Lent may not be comfortable, but it is quite clear what is expected of us. But the year is full of “ordinary” not “special” times.

A common assumption is that our beliefs determine our behavior. What we believe is more a function of how we behave than vice versa. We develop our beliefs asking, “What would a person behaving as I do believe?” Thus, if you want to

change someone’s beliefs, put them in a situation where they behave like someone with the beliefs that you desire. Get an individual to volunteer to pack meals for the hungry for one hour on one Sunday morning and you may move their beliefs about support for hunger programs in general.

Thus, the challenge of Ordinary Time is how to behave extraordinarily. Adrian’s discussion of Dietrich Bonhoeffer during the Lenten Series illustrated the

power of an individual who was able to live out his beliefs extraordinarily. But, was what Bonhoeffer faced extraordinary? Martin Luther King, Jr., Mahatma Ghandi, Nelson Mandela, and many others faced similar challenges. What was extraordinary was not what they faced but rather how they faced it—many faced the same challenges and did not act. But individuals like Bonhoeffer had a faith that led them to extraordinary action. While few of us will face a challenge like Bonhoeffer or Episcopal Bishop of Washington,

Mariann Edgar Budde, for that matter, we must regularly figure out “what would Jesus do?” Our challenges are more likely to involve how to feed the hungry or to comfort the needy, rather than the ravages of apartheid South Africa. Accepting the little challenges is what Jesus asked us to do. If we accept the little challenges, we are more likely to tackle the bigger ones. And that may lead us one day to the “extraordinary.”



Photo: Peter B. Lull

Sacred Waters



Lauren Murphy

"Are you an ocean person or a lake person?"

THAT QUESTION SOUNDED very strange to me as a newcomer to Wellesley 38 years ago. I had moved from landlocked Ohio and had never been asked that question before.

As I reflected on water, I found all water is magical—it's both a physical necessity and a spiritual symbol in our Christian tradition. It's the element we need most to survive. When my husband's and my parents were each at the ends of their lives, we found ourselves asking "how long has it been since they had water?" Water is often a marker or last touchpoint with this earthly life.

Water is mentioned all through the Bible offering lessons of renewal and the constant love of God. Genesis tells us God's Spirit hovered over the waters, bringing order to chaos. The story of Noah and the flood shows God's power to transform and create something new. At the wedding in Cana, Jesus changed water into wine to protect the wedding host from the embarrassment of running out of wine.

Baptism centers around water. We are made new in Christ's image when parents promise to raise a child in the Christian faith.

As I reflect on the question, "Are you an ocean person or a lake person?", I have decided I am a water person. When I am at the ocean, the force of waves reminds me of God's power and his steadfastness. I gain strength from seeing and hearing the majesty of the ocean. When I am at a quiet lake, I am filled with awe and calm. I love to get in a canoe and feel the gentle presence of God. We know storms arise on all bodies of water just as chaos and heartache cause turmoil in our lives. My hope is that the living water of Christ will strengthen us in the ordinary times and calm us in storms ahead.

Inspiration from Classic Literature



Hillary Madge

IN THE SUMMER MONTHS, I enjoy reading modern fiction, histories, and biographies. But when I want good stories and inspiring themes, I turn to the classics.

I used to think *The Odyssey* was just an adventure story—monsters, storms, gods meddling in human affairs. But as I matured, I saw it as

a story about endurance, about facing obstacles that threaten to break us, and choosing to keep going.

Odysseus could have given up so many times. Stranded on an island for years, tempted by ease and comfort, battling storms that seemed designed to crush his spirit—who could blame him for quitting? And yet, he kept going. Not because it was easy, but because he had a reason: "I am driven by a deep longing to see the day of my homecoming." His determination to return, even after all that he endured, reminds me that sometimes the hardest journeys are the ones worth completing.

Odysseus wasn't the only one fighting a battle. At home, Penelope faced an entirely different kind of test. For twenty years, she endured pressure to move on, to remarry, to let go of the belief that Odysseus

would return. She was surrounded by people who doubted her, yet she stayed strong—not with swords or arrows, but with patience and intelligence. She wove her tapestry by day, refusing to let others decide her future. Her resilience was quieter than Odysseus', but no less powerful. She, too, had a choice: to give in, to accept what seemed inevitable, or to hold onto hope. She chose to believe, to endure, and in the end, she was right.

Life hands all of us moments of choice. We can surrender to doubt and hardship, or we can stand firm in our purpose. The *Odyssey* reminds me that while challenges are inevitable, defeat is not. Like Odysseus, like Penelope—we keep going. Because what we fight for is worth it. In these ordinary times, let us remember we are all capable of extraordinary deeds.

God's Signature



George Stathis

TAKING A TRIP TO ACADIA National Park is one of our favorite summer traditions—hiking, biking, kayaking in the pristine coastal Maine nature.

I remember our first hike up the Beehive, not good for anyone scared of heights! Different trails have taken us up to the top of

Cadillac Mountain, where we have enjoyed panoramic views of the ocean and Bar Harbor, as well as 50° temperatures and dense fog!

When our daughters were young, I remember pulling them in a carriage while biking along Park Loop Road. We enjoyed the breathtaking views looking over rock cliffs at the ocean below while riding alongside Sand Beach, Precipice Trail, Thunder Hole, and Otter Cliff.

Many more memories were made while bicycling along the 45+ miles of perfectly graded broken stone carriage roads that run throughout the park, complete with cedar signposts and granite coping stones known as “Rockefeller’s Teeth” along the sides. The carriage roads are aligned with the contours of the land, thus allowing those fortunate enough to be traversing through on foot, bike, or horseback

to enjoy magnificent views of lush green forests and serene lakes.

We started many of our rides near Eagle Lake, eventually descending upon the Jordan Pond House restaurant where we enjoyed refreshing drinks and their irresistible popovers. As the girls grew, we ventured further out to other parts of the park along the carriage road system where we saw magnificent stone-faced bridges that seemed more appropriate for Central Park than the Maine wilderness.

Time at Acadia has allowed me to reflect on life with proper perspective and created so many indelible and wonderful memories of being outdoors with my family. With God’s signature all over the surrounding nature, I can think of no better place for physical, mental, and spiritual restoration.

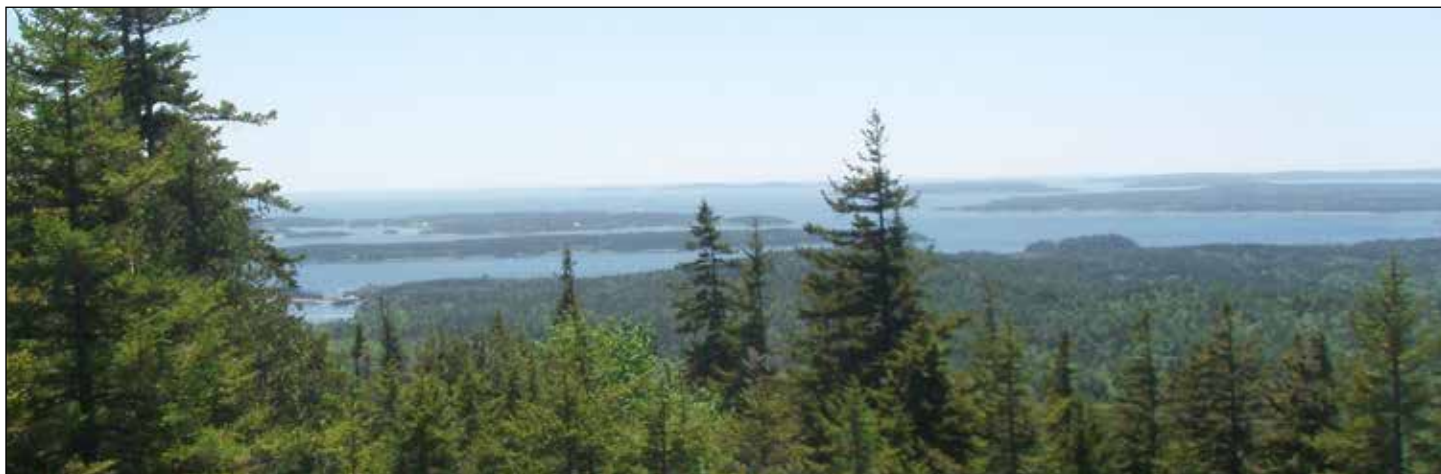


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