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It's time to 'hunt the words'

Joan Chittister | Mar. 29, 2007 From Where I Stand

There's an old monastic quatrain that fascinates me. It reads:

> *I and Pangur Ban my cat,*
>
> *T'is a like task we are at.*
>
> *Hunting mice is his delight.*
>
> *Hunting words I sit all night.*

What intrigues me about the little rhyme is that it was written around the year 800 by a monk who lived on Skellig Michael. I'm not surprised that he wrote it; I'm surprised by its implications -- for both then and now.

You see, Skellig Michael, a pyramid of needle-pointed rock totally unredeemed by beaches or fields at its base, juts out of the Atlantic Ocean 714 feet above the sea that froths at its jagged edges. It stands bare and forbidding, not a piece of flat land on it till you get to a ledge below the summit. Up there, a group of sixth century Celtic monks began what historians say was the first monastic settlement in Europe.

Intent on living in direct relationship to God and nature, these early monks left the mainland to build five "beehive huts" -- small, cone-shaped rock cells -- at the peak of the mountain. They lived off the fish of the ocean, a few small native plants, and the thousands of birds that inhabited this otherwise uninhabitable place with them. They were, to all appearances, totally removed from the world around them.

Most striking of all about Skellig Michael, perhaps, is that this bare chunk of a mountain in the middle of the sea is over nine miles off the coast of County Kerry in Southwest Ireland. To reach the mainland would take a day's sail, and then only when the water was calm enough to allow them to even attempt it. To reach the summit, the monks chiseled, by hand, more than 2,300 stone steps into the surface of the mountain. (I know that because I have climbed them myself .) Up there at the top, where the winds are strong enough to blow a person right off the side of the crest into the bitter sea below, life was raw, cold and remote. Very remote. Surely isolated. Definitely 'out of this world,' out of touch, out of step, out of time.

Don't believe it.

The monks who inhabited this God-forsaken place in the middle of the ocean for more than 500 years -- until midway through the 12th century, in fact -- wrote most of the history of that part of the world. They wrote about earthquakes in Gaul, about small pox epidemics, about cures for disease, about the plunderings of the Vikings, and about one social struggle after another over hundreds of miles away. Clearly, "hunting words they sat all night." Physically distant and totally separated, far removed and supposedly disinterested in the world around them, they nevertheless knew what was going on and set out to alert the rest of the world to it. They contributed to the development of Europe from a mountain outpost in the Atlantic Ocean.

Point: We all have a responsibility for the world around us. No one is out of touch unless he or she chooses to be.

Which brings us to the present.

We have in modern U.S. history, it seems, our own version of Skellig Michael. It's called "The White House." It juts out of the sea of people who think it's there to represent the ideals of this country and its people, but it is out of touch and out of time.

There, separated from the rest of the world and isolated even from its own, a community of advisors who think the country elected *King* George I instead of *President* George Bush, work hard to maintain his isolation. But we know now that there are breaches in the system.

For instance, this president has been told by countless political figures -- Congress people and heads of state, by two secretaries of state and now by his own new secretary of defense, Robert Gates (See Chanker and Sanger, *New York Times*, March 23) to close the prison at Guantanamo Bay. Called a "detention and interrogation center" in polite language, conducted as a torture center, in plain language, Guantanamo is still holding 385 prisoners incomunicado after five years of imprisonment and is doing more harm to this country than anything any enemy could possibly do to us.

Supposedly designed offshore to protect the United States mainland, it has ruptured not only our public relations with other countries but our own sense of self. With its policies of illegal detention, isolation, abuse and torture, it is doing more harm to the reputation, credibility and future of this country than anything in U.S. history. It serves only to harden the world's attitudes against us and to justify the very evil we say we're fighting.

It discredits the whole notion of U.S. justice, of public morality, of civil rights and of the rule of law in what we like to think is one of the most moral countries in the world. To be held without charge is probably to breach the most fundamental human rights we have, the very ones the founding fathers struggled to establish.

And, counseled by their own advisors, as well as the U.S. public, to close Guantanamo for that reason, the White House knows that. What is hard to understand, then, is why they go on maintaining it.

But what is at least as difficult to understand as why they do it is why we as a country, as a judiciary, as a

legislature, as a people, allow it to go on? What kind of democracy is it that never raises its voice? Is this the real spiritual vacuum we face as a nation while we struggle so hard to present ourselves as a spiritual people and so preserve a patina of ongoing moral righteousness?

From where I stand, it is clear from the history of Skellig Michael that it's true: no one really is an island, no matter how hard they try to be. Like the monks in the middle of an ocean, we cannot simply stand afar off and say nothing when our world is being systematically dismantled in the name of God, by virtue of raw power, without regard even for our own best ideals.

The monks went offshore to find God but there they discovered that, in order to do that, they needed to accept responsibility for one another, as well. It may be time for us, here and now, to learn that lesson again, to "sit all night," to "hunt the words" that say it clearly, that make it real.

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