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# A true contemplative who liked to drink beer

Rich Heffern | Sep. 24, 2010 NCR Today

My friend Br. Wally Kendrick died this summer. For many years he lived as a hermit on land belonging to the Trappist Assumption Abbey in southern Missouri. I often visited him there when I lived nearby in the early 1980s. His little house made of rough-cut oak planks perched on the top of a high ridge with a breathtaking view of the surrounding hills, ridges and hollows.

Wally served on a navy tanker in the Aleutian islands during World War II. After the war, like many, he entered the big Trappist monastery in Kentucky, living there under that strict rule until the 1960s when he left and traveled around the country finally settling in San Francisco for a time. He moved to Missouri in the early 1970s and began his hermit career as an unofficial lay brother in the Trappist community.

Wally drove a fork lift truck in the monastery?s concrete block plant a few days a week, spending the rest of his time in prayer and silence, or reading, and listening to his record collection which he could play at full volume with no human neighbors nearby to complain. A summer evening as fog lifted out of the hollow below his house would often ring to the soaring orchestral sonorities of the *Russian Easter Overture* or Rachmaninoff?s *Second Piano Concerto.* The pileated woodpeckers, chickadees, whippoorwills and screech owls that were his nearest neighbors took it all in stride.

A typical conversation with Wally would range through topics like the contemplative theology of French Benedictine Henri La Saux (Abhishiktananda), Wally?s memories of free Grateful Dead concerts in Golden Gate Park in the 1970s, or his recall of working a summer with Dorothy Day in the Bowery, his current friendships with the gentle yet colorful hill people who lived nearby and worked with him at the block plant, his visit to Madonna House in Canada, punctuated by his grins, chortles and even his raucous laughter when he would recount the time Thomas Merton had told the monks in Kentucky, ?We need to consider that we probably aren?t really true contemplatives any longer but just introverts.?

Wally understood early on that contemplation was not an elitist kind of thing reserved for the few and the brave, but rather a committed, ongoing stance that anyone could take, even in the noisiest and most disruptive of environments, that it was developing the knack of seeing the Divine Mystery at work in the most unlikely places and then letting those visions rest in the heart not the mind. He talked often about this, and we learned from him.

A man of solitude and prayer, he could talk your damn ears off when he got wound up.

Sometimes Fr. Leon, one of the other Trappist hermits, would stop by and a simple Mass would be celebrated in Wally?s hermitage, followed by a night drive back home that took me across the Bryant River's low-water bridge where I would stop and take in the full moon gleaming on the river?s swift current or the stars of the Milky Way reflected in the still pools. Occasionally I would drive Wally up to Kansas City where we?d take in a movie then spend the four hour trip back discussing what we?d seen.

As he aged with a neatly trimmed grey beard, Wally reminded you of Ernest Hemingway. As he got older and scrawnier, he morphed into Willy Nelson, then Ben Gunn. He often wore a faded, ramshackle red trucker hat.

Wally?s last years were spent in Assumption Abbey?s new infirmary wing. A broken pelvis, a heart attack, and failing kidneys from 20 years of diabetes, finally persuaded him to bequeath his hermitage and move into the monastery.

Fr Cyprian, the present abbot at Assumption Abbey, described Wally?s last day. ?Wally?s spunky spirit kept him going and on his feet to the end. After his late midday meal that Friday, he walked out to the mailbox and was coming back with his cane in one hand and his mail in the other. He fell just at the kitchen ramp. A few brothers and Jill, our health care aide, carried him into his room, but Wally was already gone.?

I was glad to hear that his moment of death came outdoors. His funeral took place quickly. The funeral hearse from town broke down on the rough gravel road to the monastery. A friend was going by in his pickup and offered to convey Wally?s body on to the monastery. My sister-in-law, who attended the funeral, said Wally arrived in the back of the battered pickup and, when they unloaded him in front of the gathered, solemn monks in their black and white robes, a number of empty beer cans spilled out onto the ground.

Wally would have liked that, I think. He loved conversation and good beer.

In his eulogy, Fr. Cyprian mentioned some of Wally?s favorite quotes: ?The present moment is the only reality.? ?What is IT?? ?In the great white quiet, every petty, malicious and unworthy feeling died away.?

Wally was no introvert. Anyone who tried to get a word in edgewise in a conversation with him knows that. He was a true contemplative, the very best of the breed -- the gentle, fun-loving hermit with the faded red trucker hat.

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