

## Monastic Soul

I remember once sitting at work, when the internet was a new and novel thing, coming across a website, an anagram generator. Just key in a few words and the site shuffled the letters around to make new words. Sorry, you probably know what an anagram is. Anyway, I idly typed in my name, *Simon Coultas*, clicked enter and out popped the anagram *monastic soul*.

My coworker at the time was amazed - *it just suits you so* - she said, as she quickly typed in her name - only to her dismay, the anagram came out *oiler chip pan*. Which was obviously a downer for her, but it made *monastic soul* all the more astounding for me.

Years earlier I was walking up a hill in Assisi, Italy when some one actually asked me if I was a monk.

I was at art school in the mid 1980s and for my degree I had to write a dissertation. I chose to write about St. Francis. Something about his openness to the mysteries of the universe and how perhaps he was the ultimate performance artist, whose masterpiece was his manifestation of the stigmata. I used the beautiful painting of St. Francis in the Desert by Giovanni Bellini, so replete with Christian symbolism, to illustrate my text. Just so my paper wasn't too religious I sprinkled it with pertinent quotes from John Dewey's book, *Art as Experience*.

I think when I wrote *Let us embrace mystery* in the preface I was pleading subconsciously to the person grading my paper to give me the benefit of the doubt.

Let's be honest the only mystery here is what the heck was Simon writing about. Let's say I didn't get the best grade for my degree. I was crushed.

While the fragmented thoughts of my paper were yet to coalesce I thought a trip to Assisi might be just the catalyst I needed. I was delighted to learn that, for not very much money, I could purchase a bus ticket from Norwich, UK to Assisi, Italy. Imagine that! And I could catch this miracle bus at the end of my street. Public transport in Europe is amazing.

I planned to travel light. I put my sewing skills to work and fashioned a small duffle bag out of an old blanket. I'm so sensible, I even sewed in a tag with my name and address. In this bag I placed toiletries and a change of clothes. I wasn't sure if I would

like Italian food, so as a precaution, I also packed several cans of tuna fish and a can opener.

The bus timetable was almost as important as my passport. It listed all the cities on the route, Paris, Lyon, Turin, Milan, Florence and so on. It would be imperative that I didn't doze off and miss my stop, as the bus continued on, all the way to Athens, Greece. And that could prove mightily inconvenient.

After two days and two nights on a bus I finally arrived in Assisi. Standing on the chair, in the attic room of the Pensione Sole, I could poke my head through the skylight window and look across the tiled roof tops, swallows swooping high and low. Surely this was the place my dissertation would coalesce. Little did I know!

And so one day, I was walking through the Umbrian countryside amid tall cypress trees, poppies and campions, when a man passing on a bicycle stopped and asked if I was a monk. *Frate?* He questioned. Who, me? I thought, looking around to see if anyone else was there, - *No, sorry, I'm not* - was my reply.

I wonder why he would think that, I ask myself, as I continue on my way, hiking up the steep slope of Monte Subasio, en route to the medieval hermitage, Eremo delle Carceri, with my shaved head, sandals on my feet and my little bag made of an old blanket. Now why on earth would he think that?

Years later, in the sterile work environment of the Business, Science and Technology Department of an urban library, stifled in my shirt and tie, thousands of miles away from the 13th century hilltop haunts of St. Francis, it takes a computer algorithm to open my eyes to the notion that perhaps I am indeed after all, a *monastic soul*.