A nonbeliever retreats to a monks’ abbey to practice their rituals and routines

By Ethan Gilsdorf

I arrive in rain and gloom and fog to see where in me is God. Or why God is not in me.

This explains why an atheist elected to infiltrate Saint Joseph’s Abbey and its Discalced Carmelite Order of the Strict Observance for a few days. Perhaps “infiltrate” is not the correct word. “Crash”? Or simply “be in the presence of” and see what a rigorous expression of faith might be like. And if any of it might rub off.

Crest: When asked, I say I was raised neither Christian nor anything else. I say I was raised by wolves. I have never prided in a way that most devout people would consider praying. Yet I want to be tethered to a presence beyond myself. I could see that in my life. I need that.

But as Anne Sexton wrote in the poem “With Mercy for the Greedy” in response to a friend who asks her “to call a priest” and “we’re The Cross,” “need is not quite belief.” So I’m here. Needing. Eyes open.

Day 1:
Saint Joseph’s Abbey is a 2,000-acre time capsule 20 minutes west of Worcester. In 1950, these Roman Catholic monks, popularly known as Trappists, moved here from the Discalced Carmelites of Providence. Their old abbey in Cumberland, R.I., had been destroyed by fire (so had their previous locations in Nova Scotia). Once again, the monks began anew.

My family and I have many memories of a week spent in a waterworld called Rangeley Lake, wild raspberries, orange seniors, morning ales, children splashing for hours in crystal water, fresh-caught salmon glistening with lemon and butter, and causing in a warm summer rain.

But as newcomers to Rangeley, there are many memories we don’t have. A gunning with tweens around campfire, family raquet shows, sandal baseball, potato dinners, and bean-bob boxes (part of a woodchuck version of a clamshell). For generations of New Englanders who have been coming here for years, such moments are woven into the fabric of their family life.

“My grandfather, my father, and my uncle first came to this place to go fishing in 1936,” said the Rev. Fr. Tom Tupper, of a pasture from Norwalk, Conn. “When they came back from that first trip they bought the rest of the family.

By Tim Wacker

A Norman Rockwell summer place

David Dominy with his daughter Lane, 3, and son Jachob, 8, at Rangeley Lake.

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