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Pico Iyer: If you feel that you're caught up in a world whose values don't accord with your own or don't speak to your deepest longings and intimations, I think it's a very fruitful thing not necessarily to go to this monastery but to go on retreat in some form just to be reoriented and to be reminded of what's real, what is on the far side of the clamor of the moment.

James Shaheen: Hello, and welcome to *Tricycle Talks*. I'm James Shaheen, and you just heard Pico Iyer. Pico is a writer and longtime *Tricycle* contributing editor based in suburban Japan. Over the course of the past thirty-three years, he has made more than one hundred retreats to a small Benedictine hermitage outside of Big Sur. In his new book, *Aflame: Learning from Silence*, he explores the profound insights that come from silence—and how sitting in stillness can train us to care for one another in a world on fire. In my conversation with Pico, we talk about how silence facilitates letting go of the self, why he believes that a monk is at heart the ultimate man of the world, and what it means to become aflame. So here's my conversation with Pico Iyer.

James Shaheen: OK, so I'm here with prolific writer and longtime *Tricycle* contributing editor Pico Iyer. Hi, Pico. It's great to be with you.

Pico Iyer: So really nice to see and hear you again, James.

James Shaheen: So we're here to talk about your new book, *Aflame: Learning from Silence*. So to start, can you tell us a bit about the book and what inspired you to write it?

Pico Iyer: Well, to start at the very beginning, one day I was at my family home in the hills of California, and I went upstairs and I saw our house was encircled by seventy-foot flames, and I was caught in the middle of a forest fire for three hours. By the time I escaped later that evening, our home and everything in it had been reduced to ash, and so I was left for many months



sleeping on a friend's floor while my mother and I slowly reconstructed our lives. At one point, another friend came in and he saw me there and he said, “Come on, Pico, you can do better than this.” He was a school teacher, and he told me that every spring he took his high school students up to a retreat house three and a half hours to the north. He said that even the most fidgety 15-year-old Californian boy only had to spend three days in silence, and something in him cooled down and opened out to the point where many of his students never wanted to come back into the world. I thought, well, what works for a 15-year-old boy is probably ideal for me, and also, if nothing else, as my friend stressed, I would have a bed to sleep in, a big desk, a private walled garden, a view over the ocean, hot showers nearby, food laid out, all for thirty dollars a night, so what was there to lose?

The one drawback from my point of view was that it turned out that this place was a Benedictine hermitage. I had grown up in Anglican England, and I thought I had had all the hymnals and crosses I needed for a lifetime, but nonetheless it was a better practical prospect. I drove three and a half hours north, I stepped into my cell, as they call it, and instantly, in that quickening silence, which wasn't an absence of noise but a presence of something, all the agitation and chatter and distraction that had been filling me on the drive up dissolved, and I was just in the middle of a radiant world. In other words, some part of me had been left on the highway below, and I was just taking in the sun on the water and the rabbit on my fence and the bells tolling behind me. I started going there more and more often, and now, over thirty-three years I've stayed with those monks more than a hundred times, sometimes for as long as three weeks, and quite often these days actually staying with the monks in their enclosure.

James Shaheen: So, Pico, you mentioned fire, and your mother lost her house to fire. Fire is so prevalent throughout the book it may as well be a character in the book. I was wondering if you could read a piece from the book that really captures those fires and the metaphorical fires that emerge in Christian literature, too.



Pico Iyer: This is near the beginning of the book. I'm sitting in my trailer in a storm.

“The sudden downpour is a blessing, but none of us knows when the flames will next flare over the ridge. Fire is the true Superior in many a monastery; I think of Merton, walking for hours through the darkened corridors of his monastic home, with flashlight and key, to ensure no embers threaten the aging wooden building in which he and his brothers live. It’s hot in the midsummer dark, especially in the furnace room; he looks in on the fuse box, never guessing that his own death will come, fifteen years on, through the kind of fire known as electrocution.

‘Sooner or later the world must burn, and all things in it,’ he knows. Yet he also knows that the monk’s first duty is to keep the fires within alight. ‘If you so wish,’ observes one of the Desert Fathers whose sayings Merton collects, ‘you can become aflame.’”

James Shaheen: Thank you so much, Pico. So can you say more about what it means to become aflame?

Pico Iyer: Yes, I can say too much about all of that, and as I was reading it, I was thinking how it sounds exactly like the Buddha's Fire Sermon to the word. I think that the Buddha says everything is aflame, and we all know right now that the whole world is a house on fire, metaphorically, because all of us are impermanent, but literally because forest fires are taking down more and more of the world. When I was caught in that fire in the family home, it was the worst fire in Californian history, and probably every year since then, there's been a worse fire to set a new record.

I think to be aflame in this sense means to be burning with a sense of purpose, of clarity, and direction, and that's the section I was alluding to from the “Fire Watch” sermon, which is at the end of Thomas Merton's book, *The Sign of Jonas*. Since so many monasteries are old, fragile buildings, a monk every night has to make sure that there's nothing to imperil the building, but even more he has to make sure that there's nothing to imperil his conviction that has to outlast



every building. And I think, as you know from having read the book, one theme is again and again over the thirty-three years during which I've been spending time there, suddenly a flame will leap over the ridge behind the monastery, and most of the monks will have to evacuate at high speed not knowing if they'll have a home to go back to. And yet their challenge as monks, as with most of us, is to keep aflame their conviction, their hope, their optimism, and not to let the physical fire make them despair, which I think for Christian monks and for many of us is the very worst sin. It's a question everyone is facing, especially as there's more and more despair in the world: How do you keep hope alive and ablaze when there are so many reasons to have no hope? And for quite a long time, although I write a lot about the Catholic monks in this book, I had in mind as a cover for this work one of those classic statues of the Buddha encircled by flames. How do you remain calm in the midst of tumult? And I think so many of my friends in the US are confronting that question right now, but most people around the world, I think, are addressing it with more urgency than ever.

James Shaheen: Right, you mentioned that you visited the monastery more than a hundred times over the course of the past three decades. So could you tell us about this particular monastery and its history?

Pico Iyer: Yes, so it belongs to the Camaldolese congregation, which is the most contemplative order within the Benedictines, and they have actually been given, as it were, a mandate or a mission by the Vatican to engage with other faiths. As you probably know, Vatican II said that the Church doesn't reject anything that is true or holy. And so, partly because they're contemplatives, and partly because this is what makes them distinct, they spend much of their time interacting with others. So, for example, the recent prior would regularly lead workshops at the Tassajara Zen Center across the hills. When I went into his cell, I would see a poster of Jesus in the lotus position. And the same order, the Camaldolese, maintain an ashram in southern India, which is essentially a Catholic-Hindu ashram. So although there's a priest at the center, he wears a dhoti, he sleeps on the ground, he eats with his hands, and maybe most importantly, I'm told



that at the entrance to the ashram is that beautiful sentence, “We are here to awaken from the illusion of separateness,” which I think is a beautiful sentence for all of us, that most of our problems come from assuming we're separate from everything around us. Later, I found out it's actually from Thich Nhat Hanh. The Catholic Hindu ashram is being led by Buddhist wisdom.

I think spending time in a monastery, maybe especially for me, a Christian monastery, having grown up in Christian schools, involved working my way through a lot of preconceptions or stereotypes, and I think the first and most important was I had always imagined that monks, having committed their life to a certain belief, would be possessed of the conviction that theirs was the right way and the only way. And I quickly saw that the monks I met were the least dogmatic souls I know, much less dogmatic than I and most of my friends are.

It reminded me of all the time I spent with His Holiness, the Dalai Lama, just that sense that somebody who's really deep in a conviction of where he or she stands is most open to every other tradition. For example, when I go and stay with my Camaldolese friends in Big Sur, California, and I open the brochure that they put in every retreat room desk, the very first page says, “The father of monasticism is the Buddha,” and then quotes from the Rig Veda. That's the spirit I think that they exemplify, and that moves me a lot, because I think most of the people on retreat there are probably women, and I think a large number are Buddhist or Sufi or nothing at all.

The monks open their hearts and open their doors to everybody. They make no demands. It's not a guided retreat. You are free to do anything you want in those three days. They pray five times a day in the chapel, but you're not asked to attend those prayers or to read the Bible or anything. And I think they're confident in the knowledge that anybody in silence will find what he or she most needs, which is to say maybe the deepest part of herself, the part of life and the part of the self that gets lost in the hurry of the everyday, and maybe that part in us which has never been wounded. In other words, there's some pure space within us that we lose when we're racing from the bank to the pharmacy, and I think we have to put ourselves in a very silent place to recover it.



And so, after thirty-three years spending time with them, I still don't share their beliefs. I don't expect ever to become a Christian, but I'm still so moved and instructed by their actions.

One reason that I put so much emphasis in this book on silence is that I feel silence is nondenominational. It's in the space beyond texts and theories, and in this moment in history, I think many of us are cutting up the world with our convictions and our belief we know better or more than everybody else. Silence is almost a place beyond belief. I mean, it goes back to when you were asking about fire, I was just thinking how Jung said the difference between a good life and a bad life is how we walk through the fire, and although that can be assisted by belief and probably is in the case of my monk friends, it's a question, really, that doesn't have so much to do with belief as, I think, with clarity and priority and perspective.

James Shaheen: Right. With regard to the silence at the hermitage, you write, “It's as if a lens cap has come off and once the self is gone, the world can come flooding in in all its wild immediacy.” So can you say more about this wild immediacy? How does silence facilitate this letting go of self, which we in Buddhism, as well as the Benedictines at the monastery, are so familiar with, and letting in of the world?

Pico Iyer: Thank you, James. I mean, that's probably the central description of the retreat experience for me, so thank you for picking it out. And I think, you know, I would stress and I say in the book, the silence I find in any monastery or convent anywhere in the world, in any order, is not just the quiet of being on a mountaintop or being in a forest; it's an active silence that I think has been almost created by years and decades of prayer or meditation.

You feel it when you get out of your car in a Hindu convent, in a Buddhist retreat house, in a Catholic monastery. It's almost like a series of transparent walls that makes the world transparent and dissolves all borders. And so, although I couldn't explain it, as I was saying earlier, the fact of the matter was that I was out of my head and in the world.

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In some sense, I would say that this active, quickening silence brought me to my senses. And so, as I say, as soon as I set foot in that little room, the first time and the next hundred times, I was wide awake. I wasn't thinking about the world, and I wasn't fretting about it or fighting against it. I was just suddenly noticing the flowers in the garden and the way the light came up over the hills and the sound of the birds behind me. One of the things that struck me was that the house where my family had been living, which is the one that burnt down, was at exactly the same elevation as the monastery, so there were the same birds singing, the same ocean view, the same stars at night, and I never noticed them. If I was tempted to just sit outside in the evening and look at the stars, I would remember there are a thousand emails I could be attending to, and the phone is ringing, and the Lakers are on TV. We're all so subject to distraction now, so I think the first blessing of this place is, as with most retreat centers, no cell phone, no internet reception, no television. Much more than that, though, no me, no thoughts. And after I read the sentence that you just invoked, I came across, again, a fine sentence from Thomas Merton, who said, “When my mind is silent, the world becomes magnificently real,” which is a better description than I could give.

And I think, as you said, in meditation, I think that's what all my Buddhist friends know, as soon as you can quiet the mind, suddenly you're hearing the wind through the trees. You're seeing the light falling on the ground. You're registering the smells. You're alive to everything around you.

And I find I spend much too much time in my head captive to my chatter, which is only going to go around in circles and, and not alive to the world. I think that a lot of Buddhist teachings say that as soon as your mind, as it were, is empty, you can be filled with everything around you. And everything around you, for me, is likely to be wiser and deeper and more enduring than I am. So what a relief, when I go there, to be free of Pico and to be free of my little plans and agendas and ambitions and really to feel myself filled up with the silence and light and occasionally tolling bells.



James Shaheen: So, as you say, “Yesterday, I thought myself at the center of the world. Now the world seems to sit at the center of me.” That pretty much captures that.

Pico Iyer: Yes. Two things strike me. One is every time I go there, a caring friend will say to me, “Isn't it selfish to leave behind your aging mother and abandon your wife and neglect your responsibilities in the world for three days or sometimes longer?” It looks like that, but I think it's the only way I can learn to be a little less selfish. Every time I go, there are a thousand reasons not to go: My bosses can't get in touch with me, and I'm missing my friend's birthday party, and my mother is alone in the house. And every time I come back, I realize it's only by going there that I have anything joyful and fresh to share with all of them. So I feel it's an important investment in that sense.

The other thing that I was going to say is one of my friends said to me, “Well, of course, you like being away from other people—you're a writer, you're an only child, you like being by yourself,” and that's true, but what I said to my friend was actually, I want to be away from the kind of a self I am when other people are around. Because I always feel that I wear a social self, and probably most of us do, and deeper than that, there's a silent self. And I want to activate that silent self where I think the best of me resides.

I'm much too captive to the expectations of society—when I'm sitting in my apartment now, talking to you, talking to my wife, meeting my friends, there's a certain face that seems right for that context. But I want to find something much deeper than that face, and I can only do it not just by being in silence but by being away from the world as a whole. And I'm very glad you mentioned the important points that none of this is specific to this place or to this practice. And so that's why, as you saw in the book, I have quite a lot about Leonard Cohen when he was a Zen monk and the Dalai Lama and a very wise Zen abbess I know, because none of this is unfamiliar to Buddhists.



I don't want to bombard you with quotes, but I just ran into a beautiful sentence from Rilke, who said, talking about the inner landscape, which I think is ever more drowned out in our external world—there's so much coming in on us now that it's harder and harder to hear silence or to hear our inner voice—and he said, “The inner world is intensified sky deep with the winds of homecoming.” And I love that sense of homecoming, because I think all of us know that's what's involved when we go on retreat in any form, or when we travel into silence. It's a return to the home that we've lost as we're scurrying from one place to another in our everyday lives.

James Shaheen: So Pico, meditators are also often accused of navel gazing or of a selfishness of the sort you mentioned. But as an example of how silence can actually improve your ability to be in relationship with others, you note that when you visited your father in the ICU, you realized that the only thing that could sustain him and you would be whatever you'd gathered in stillness. So how do silence and stillness help you in these moments of crisis?

Pico Iyer: I think it gives you clarity. It gives you a certain degree of calm that I might not have otherwise. And it gives you a sense of the larger picture that, as you said in the quotation about not being at the center of the world, we are tiny things in time and space within this much larger picture. And again, I'm reminded that whenever somebody comes to the Dalai Lama with a terrible problem, and I've been with him, as you know, for fifty years now, he always says, “Please take a wider perspective. I'm so sorry you're suffering. Unfortunately, suffering is part of existence, but please just see things in a much larger canvas.”

It doesn't necessarily remove the suffering, but it allows you perhaps better to understand it, and maybe a little to be less fixated on it. I think that's one thing that I can bring to the table when I'm visiting people in need or when I'm in need myself, and then I think the other thing that's very important, and every Buddhist who's meditated knows this too, is that when I'm in myself, very quiet, I feel much closer to my loved ones than sometimes when they're in the same room, because I'm not fully present. My wife is across the room from me now, but I'm talking to you, I'm not giving anything to her. And as she's busy vacuuming, and as I'm in another corner of the



room writing, we're sharing the same space, but we're not necessarily sharing our full beings. I'm not present in some ways. The beauty of actually stepping away from the world for me is remembering what I care about, and then trying to come back into the world to do more justice to the people I love and the things that are most important.

When I first went to this monastery, and this is probably akin to anybody who meditates, I just rejoiced in the heaven and the radiance of the solitude. And the longer I've stayed there, the more I see that the solitude is just a gateway to a richer and deeper and more directed sense of compassion. And of course, when I stay with the monks, I find the opposite of solitude and the opposite of silence, because they're working around the clock to ensure that I and the other guests are comfortable, that their lives are all about tending to one another and tending to every guest. It's about service, essentially. I don't think that, as somebody who likes solitude, I had quite understood before how solitude is only a means to the far more important end of serving everybody else. I often think back on the fact that I never expected I would get married, and it was only by spending two weeks one spring alone in my cell in the monastery that I decided I had to get married. In other words, it was that time alone that taught me I'm never alone, and it was that time alone that told me go back into the world and really try to give yourself to somebody else instead of cocooning yourself within your solitude.

James Shaheen: Right. You know, in your cell at the hermitage, there's a laminated card that says, “Sit in your cell as in paradise. Put the whole world behind you and forget it. Empty yourself out and sit waiting.” So what does it look like to sit as if in paradise?

Pico Iyer: Thank you for reading that. That's the heart of this particular order, and it comes from Romuald, who founded the order. In the book, I mention how at one meeting, one of the monks said, “Remember, sitting in your cell as if in paradise is really just a way of saying sitting in yourself as if in paradise.” In other words, I think it's the essential Buddhist truth that you don't have to go racing around the world to find some paradise. It's here if only you can open your mind to it, as it were, wake up to the fact that everything you need is here, right here, right now.



It's about the end of grasping, the end of desire, the end of the need to be anywhere other than where you are.

Again, Merton talks about becoming who you really are, which is something that's actually often a challenge for us because there are so many false or diminished visions of who we could be. And so I think sitting in that room, and I know this won't be strange to any Buddhist student, is just sitting absolutely present to the moment and realizing nothing is needed and this is all the paradise you could ever hope to find. Of course, monasteries were classically built around a cloister and a garden that was an image of paradise, but the Camaldolese dispense even with that because they know that the only paradise that counts, and I smile as I say all that because I remember the last time I was a guest on this podcast here and I talked about external paradises and cutting through the illusion and the projection involved in saying paradises in Tahiti or Tibet or wherever it might be and acknowledging that the only place can be right here.

James Shaheen: Right, you know, something really nice that you write is that every day in silence is an incarnation. What do you mean by that?

Pico Iyer: To begin with, the first thing I do whenever I go to the monastery is take off my watch because I'm no longer living in clock time, *chronos*, as the Greeks called it; I'm living in a sacred time, *kairos*, that very different calendar based on the moments that really affect you rather than just the passage of the hours. And every day there seems to last a thousand hours. And of course, every day you go through so much if you're in undistracted quiet by yourself. There are storms, there is radiance, there are fears and doubts. And as you know, in the book, I come to know some of the monks very well, and they come to my little trailer and share with me their fears and their frustrations and the reminder that faith isn't a journey beyond doubt, but often it's a journey into the wilderness and into the midst of doubt. In the passage you asked me to read, it begins with a downpour. And so, you know, I can't deny that sometimes when I go there, it's raining and there's a tremendous storm and it's shaking the fragile foundations of the little wooden building in which I'm sitting and the rain is beating down on the roof all day long and I can't see any lights. In the



mist all around me, I see no sign of human habitation. It's a very fearful and a lonely place, as any day in the wilderness would be. And as any Buddhist meditator knows, some of the time you're in the middle of that storm, and there's nowhere to run and nowhere to hide, so that's a part of the equation too, though, of course, the next day, the sky often clears and it's more radiant than ever before. But I always feel with those storms, and more deeply, with the shadows and demons within myself that come out, I would much rather confront them in the quiet and safety of that silence than when I'm driving along the freeway or when I'm in a crowded room. They're going to be there whatever happens, and I'm going to have to live with them and face up to my traumas and my deficiencies wherever I am. But there seems the most benign and clement atmosphere in which to confront them.

James Shaheen: Right. You say that at the monastery, it can feel as if you're glimpsing the hidden architecture of the world. Yet, inevitably, we return to daily life, and such visions fade. So how do you navigate the transition back to everyday life after your retreats at the Hermitage, particularly when you stay there for a longer period?

Pico Iyer: That's such a good question, James. I mean, when I used to stay there for three days, I would find the spell would work for about a day after, and then I'm back in the traffic jam fretting about my tax returns: Why hasn't that invoice come in? If I stay for two weeks, it may last three days, but still very, very temporary.

I think all of us, when we go on retreat, address this issue of how to sustain even a fraction of that, as well as the memory and the prospect of it in the midst of our daily lives. You know, I initially came here to Japan with a hope of living in a temple here, and I didn't last very long, but I did come upon this important piece of Zen wisdom that the point is not to sit still in the zendo; it's to sit still in the middle of the tumultuous world.

So after I began spending time in the monastery, one thing I did was to move to this two-room apartment in the middle of nowhere in Japan. I think previously I might've thought, “Oh yeah,



that's the opposite of comfortable.” But I had been reminded that luxury is defined not by what you have but by what you don't need and that a two-room apartment might be much more comfortable than a five bedroom house. I started ensuring that I would spend one hour every day just reading a book in quiet, and when I come back every day from that hour of reading, I can tell I'm a better version of myself. I'm deeper. I'm more nuanced. I'm more attentive. I try to give fifteen minutes of every day to *Lectio Divina*, which is the monastic term, but in my case, it just means fifteen minutes to something that addresses my soul, a Buddhist work, a work by a Christian monk, a Hindu wise person, just something that is looking at essential issues, which are so easy to forget with the news blasting in on us.

And then I do try to go on retreat for at least three days every season. I worked out that that's only 3 percent of my life. But if I invested 3 percent of my life in going on retreat, it would subtly transform the other 97 percent. So it's always a challenge. And in fact, sometimes early on, when I came back from retreat, I found I was more impatient than ever before because I was so missing the paradise I'd found, and I was more short-tempered and I would do all kinds of things later I regretted. But I think that's worn away a little over the years. And as you say, given that I'm not a full-time monk, how can I try to live in the light of what I've learned from the monks and what I've seen in silence?

You know, I remember when the pandemic first broke out, and none of us really knew how to respond to this great unknowable, the prior from my Catholic monastery sent around a message to all his friends, and he said, “Remember, the best cure for anxiety is taking care of others.” That's such a very simple thing, but something I'd forgotten or hadn't thought about. In a sense, he was reminding me, “Well, you're in the middle of a cacophonous world, but try to take back into it what you sensed when you were in our community, which is that the point of all this is taking care of others, and that's actually how you let go of your needless anxieties and fretting.”

James Shaheen: Yeah, absolutely. So you write about the friendships you develop at the hermitage and the kindness and compassion you witness among the monks. Could you tell us



more about the community you found in silence? How is it that you feel close to people when you're at the hermitage? And how does this help you to care for others?

Pico Iyer: Thank you. So yes, initially, I got to know a lot of the monks quite well because they're there for life. They invite guests to come and join them for Sunday lunch, and then they invited me as a regular guest to stay with them in their enclosure, as it's called, many times over, and so they became very intimate friends. As you know from when you go on retreats, there's a very special quality when two people are living in silence. What comes out of them comes from the depths. Maybe we'd just exchange one sentence, but I would live with the sentence that I heard from a monk for many days to come, and one sentence can speak more powerfully than fifteen or twenty-one sentences.

I certainly formed strong bonds with the monks and found that they were much more down to earth than I am. You know, they're watching Monty Python films in their rec room on Sundays, and they're going down to Los Angeles to lead retreats, and they're very much in the world. But one of the happy surprises was to see that there are actually women who live on the property helping to look after the retreatants. They can't live in the enclosure where the monks are, but they live immediately out of it. I met this 96-year-old woman who was living in the cabin right next to the monks who'd got special dispensation to live there with her husband, and then he died, and she lived in a little cottage alone, but the monks tended to her, fixed her screen doors, wheeled her up so she could attend their Masses, and I quickly saw that because the monks are so busy, she was one of the really wise presences in that community because she was giving her whole life to contemplation. She lived next to the monastery for thirty-five years in this absolutely silent place, tending to the words, attending to the light, reading, reflecting, and every time I talked to her, I got so much from it.

But then the final beautiful surprise, which really took me aback, was that whenever I met a fellow retreatant along the monastery road, sometimes we'd stop and talk for about three minutes, and I would feel closer to this stranger than to some of my best friends. And that's



because, partly, we were both speaking from the deep. We were only speaking about essential things. I didn't know what her background was, which college she'd been to, what she was doing in the world. We were freed of all that extraneous clatter, and we were just two souls who had sought out silence, and we were reflecting on the light above the water, or the tolling of the bells, or what had brought us here, but we're just talking instantly in the most intimate way. And I'm sorry to say that in my regular life, if I meet a stranger along the street, I never have encounters like that. So part of the beauty was that this became, as you say, really a very sociable place for me, and whomever it was that I interacted with, whether the monks or the old woman living next to the monks or just somebody there for two days, they were interactions that felt as if they would live in me for life, and I quickly felt these are people that I trust and these are kindred spirits because they've come all this way to this very remote place in the Californian wilderness to seek out silence. So they are joined to me by something that's right at the heart of us, the most important part of us, which is drawn to the silence and which is also awakened in the silence.

I think I came to see that this monastery, I think like all monasteries and convents, wasn't just a center of love, as St. Benedict had wanted his monasteries to be, he called them schools of love, but also a center of trust, and that maybe this was part of the liberation there. I could trust everything when I went there, even myself, because it wasn't my lowest daily self; it was some intuition that was guiding me, something inside me that's wiser than I am. And so even though there are mountain lions prowling around and fires often on the way to encircle the place, one feels absolutely calm there. I trust myself. I trust my instincts, so I don't have any plans. I wake up every morning, and I just let something in me answer. Shall I go for a walk? Shall I write a letter to James? Shall I just sit here doing nothing? And I trust everybody I meet, because I think we're all trying to come in contact with the purest part of ourselves, and there's a sincerity and sweetness of intention there that clarifies much of what otherwise gets lost.

James Shaheen: You know, I really understand what you say about feeling close to people in silence. A sort of closeness develops with fellow retreatants. And the interesting thing is that



when you leave the retreat and you start talking, a lot of that energy that you've pulled dissipates with the talking. Often I find with all the talking, I feel more distant from people. It's an interesting phenomenon.

Pico Iyer: One thousand percent. I trust silence much more than any words I could offer, and I think one reason I brought out this book now is that I've never seen the world so divided as it is now. And I think it's divided because of our talk and our ideas, and our ideologies. I think on the far side of all that is a silence that we share. Of course, there can be hostile silences and unpleasant silences, but I think deep down, a collective silence is when we feel closest to everybody around us, and a collective conversation is probably when we feel most cut up and divided. That's why at a funeral or at a sacred moment, we observe a moment of silence. It's an invitation to get to the deepest part of you, but more than that, it's an invitation to form a community, a kind of communion, that if there are a hundred people observing a moment of silence, you feel tremendously close to everyone else, and in fact, you're dissolved within this larger body of a hundred people.

As you say, once we start chattering, that unity is gone, and that's why I think silence is the place we need to get to if we're ever going to stop quarreling with one another. One of the first things I find is every time I drive up there, I'm probably conducting an argument with myself on the way, maybe an argument with somebody I met two weeks ago, and as I say, the silence of the hermitage purges me of all of that, and it introduces me to reality beyond all argument.

James Shaheen: You know, another irony is that often we think of a hermitage as a place where people go to remove themselves from the world, yet you say that at heart a monk is an ultimate man of the world. What do you mean by this?

Pico Iyer: Well, that sentence comes from the passage in which I describe His Holiness, the Dalai Lama, and anybody listening to this podcast knows part of the great beauty and blessing of this Dalai Lama's life is he's not on a mountaintop. He's not sequestered behind the walls of a



monastery. He's everywhere where he's in need. He's like an emergency room physician: He's in the White House, and he's in the European Parliament, and he's on the streets of New Delhi. Everything he gains through the four or eight hours of meditation he does every day is with a view to extending himself to others. So he's a perfect example of that.

I think when you say, rightly so, that people think of a hermitage as a way to get away from the real world, I see it as a way to understand what the real really is. I think it's a penetration of real life rather than an escape from real life, and it's a reminder of what is real, because after I started spending time there I began to think that what I do in the day-to-day has an element of masquerade. I don't know how real it is. And it's when I'm there that I touch a truth and a self that feel to me real in the sense of something backstage and enduring and outside our control and our small plans and hopes. You know, T. S. Eliot a long time ago talked of the life we lose in living, the life with a big L, and I think that's what I find, and you could say it's the reality that we lose by being caught up in what we think of as real life. I think if somebody were to ask me, “How has it changed you?” I would say it changes my perspective, my sense of proportions, and my sense of priority by making me feel that what I experience there is what's real and what I need to be in touch with, and what I experience in my day-to-day life is something I need to do, and that's how I've reaped the fruits of that experience of reality, but it's not something I should take too seriously, and it's not necessarily the whole picture.

James Shaheen: You know, Pico, you also say that you've come to see monastic life as the true counterculture. Say more about that.

Pico Iyer: Yes, well, they're living on the edge in every way. I start the book with the monks more or less in the midst of fire. So, in that sense, they are two and a half hours by car from the nearest hospital, they're an hour from the nearest post office, they're in the middle of a wilderness, so it's a long way from society. And I think by getting away from society, they're getting closer to humanity. That's what the monastic trade-off is all about. But beyond that, they're living by values very different from those in the world, and I find that the values that



surround me in my day-to-day life now have more to do with acceleration, distraction, what happened six seconds ago, that latest tweet, that news update, everything of the moment.

And they're living in eternity in some sense, something very different. We live, I think, in a celebrity culture; they're trying to be anonymous. We live in a culture where we're constantly hearing about billionaires; they're giving up everything in the sense of material possessions. We live in a culture where people are defining themselves by how many likes they have and whether they're more popular than other people; they have dissolved their individuality, and that's the last thing they're thinking about, how much they're liked and how much they can achieve individually. Their only thought is how much they can serve the people around them. I can't think of anything further from the culture at large, especially as it's become in recent times, and therefore I can't think of a better antidote to the culture at large. If you feel that you're caught up in a world whose values don't accord with your own, or don't speak to your deepest longings and intimations, I think it's a very fruitful thing, not necessarily to go to this monastery, but to go on retreat in some form, and there are retreat houses on every corner of the globe, just to be reoriented and to be reminded of what's real, what is on the far side of the clamor of the moment.

James Shaheen: Pico, you write that you spend time with monks and nuns, and I'll quote you here, because “they're giving themselves full-time to the essential practices: learning how to love in the midst of loss and how to hope in the face of death.” So how have you learned from their example?

Pico Iyer: So when I first went to the monastery, at some level, I wanted to know how to live. I went for the practical reasons I described at the beginning, but I felt that just the way I take my car into the garage if something's wrong with it, and I take my laptop to the Apple store if I need an expert to fix it, if something's broken in myself, I feel monastics are kind of experts in the business of living. So I went there to learn a little bit better how to live. And then as I was saying, as I spent time there, I found, to my surprise, I was learning a lot about how to love because the practice of solitude is really a means to taking deeper and better care of everyone

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around you. And then I saw that since I was in a community run by elderly men often not in the best of health, like monastics in every tradition, they're learning how to die. As the years went on, of course, I began to think, how can thinking about learning how to die help me to live better? And I also began to see that if you can sense something that feels out of time, it makes you a little less afraid of death.

I know Buddhists live with a keen sense of impermanence, and even the understanding of impermanence perhaps makes you a little less scared of death. But then, as I started actually living with the monks, I saw that even harder than learning how to die was learning how to tend to the dying, because here are fifteen elderly men in an enclosure, they've lived together for forty years, and they're getting sick all the time. And then they literally have to lead their brothers, whom they've known every breath for thirty years, into the other world or into the last breath and into what looks like oblivion.

Seven of the last eight years, this monastery has been cut off entirely from the world: three times by winter storms, two times by fires, and two times by COVID. It's a very isolated place, and when an elderly monk gets ill, he has to be helicoptered out to this faraway hospital, and then the prior of the community was driving five hours through the night every single day to tend to his brother who was in bed in the hospital, two and a half hours through the dark to get to the hospital and then two and a half hours back. He said, “I'm the only family they have.” And again, this prior, who's about my age, had to make life-and-death decisions about his brothers, And it was very moving to see that. At one point I quote one of the ailing monks saying that the prior was a very good mother. I mean, these monks are actually mothers to one another, which is a very touching thing.

But this is a long and roundabout answer to your question that witnessing all this helped me take some of this wisdom back to my own mother, who was entering the last few seasons of her life. It made me think more about what I want to do right now, given I'm not going to last forever. And it also did help me with the first two questions I was addressing about how to live, because I



changed my life in the light of this, and how to love, because that was the door that was opened to me by what I saw.

James Shaheen: OK, Pico, one last question, and this is about you. You're a journalist, an inveterate traveler, and decidedly a layman, and as you mentioned to your mother, you're at no risk of conversion, which I thought was very funny. So, how has your proximity to the world of the Hermitage and its defining silence nonetheless changed you?

Pico Iyer: I think it's changed me in every fundamental way and more than anything else in my life other than marriage, probably, by reminding me of a truth beyond my thoughts and ideas, which, for shorthand, I will say the truth to be found in silence, and trying to tell me whatever I'm going through in my life, not to lose sight of that deeper reality and also to remind me that the more I'm in touch with that, the more useful I will be, in all kinds of small ways.

As you say, I'm a man of the world. I spend a lot of my time in airports, and whenever I go to an airport now, I know where there are certain places that are very quiet and where the sun is coming in, or I can just sit quietly reading a book or doing nothing at all. And I feel if I spend time doing that, I'm going to be much more productive and useful to the people I meet when I get off the plane at the other end. So I take retreats every three months. I will listen to the kind of music and seek out the kind of art that speaks to me without words and speaks to that part of me that's beyond words and will nourish me at the core. So I think it's just adjusted all my choices, and though I will never convert to a particular doctrine, I am convinced that there's a value in the reality in each one that's really precious. And the closer I can stay to that, even in the middle of my busy days, the more helpful I will be to everybody, including myself. So I think lots of small daily practices that I would never have considered otherwise.



James Shaheen: You know, I know that you have a career, you have a family to support, and as you say, you're a man of the world, but has it ever occurred to you or have you ever been tempted to fully enter such a world as the Hermitage?

Pico Iyer: Thank you for that question, James, because it's a real longing, and it's probably the big question in my life: How come I didn't? What was it that made that never happen? Because from a very early age, I only had to step into one of those places, and I felt a profound longing the way some people do when they see a beautiful person, or others when they see a very tasty piece of cake, whatever it might be. I just felt a pull, and I felt that that was the life that was summoning me very strongly. And that's why when I was 29 and I was leading quite an exciting life in New York city, I left it with the hope of living in a temple in Japan. But interestingly, when I did that, I quickly saw that it was a complete romance. I had a notion of what a temple in Japan would be, which is sitting under the full moon composing haiku, that was completely unreal. And when, four years later, I started staying with the Benedictines, the good thing for me was that there was no romance involved. It was a necessity and a reality brought about by a forest fire, and I backed into it rather than running toward it. So that was already a good thing.

I think I could have come quite close at times. But I'm at fault there. I'm a member of the world of short attention spans and a member of the world where people are shy about making commitments, and I'm the worst offender. So although I like spending time there, I've never made the full commitment to obedience. Poverty and chastity I could probably manage, but obedience is a very hard one for me. So it's my deficiency because that has always felt like the home that was waiting for me.

I will say that when I first came to Japan, I was too immature to live the monastic life I had in mind that, or that I'd fantasized about, but now we've spent thirty-two years in this two-room apartment, my wife and I. I never use a cell phone. We don't have a car. I don't have a bicycle. It's



a very simple life, and actually, it's somewhat close to the monastic life I probably first envisaged, but I'm leading it with my wife and with two kids who are out in the world.

I mentioned in the book how when I first began staying at the Hermitage, I would go down to the highway where there's a payphone, and once a week I would call my wife-to-be, and she would hear the joy in my voice, and she would feel rightly threatened. And she said memorably once, “Look, I could compete with any woman you're interested in. I can be more excellent. How can I compete with a temple?” She sensed that it was her big rival. And as soon as she said that, I actually decided to make a very serious commitment and come and live full-time and support her and her two little kids at that time. But now the beauty of it is when I go to the hermitage, she comes with me, so we're sort of hand in hand walking into the monastic life together. And the monks are much happier to see her than they are me. She's a breath of fresh air in their community. Suddenly she sees it's not a rival, but it's something that we can share. So this is all a long answer again to your question but my imperfect way to try to stay true to certain of the principles I've learned from the monks but while leading a married life in the world. But I'm still surprised I never became a monk.

James Shaheen: I was also amused that your wife got the nicer cabin.

Pico Iyer: She gets the nicer cabin. I get a cell, but we take walks together and we have lunch in her nice cabin.

James Shaheen: So, Pico, anything else before we close?

Pico Iyer: Oh, no, just such a joy always to talk to you, James, and I'm so honored that you would invite me to be in this conversation. Thank you.

James Shaheen: Pico Iyer. Thanks so much for joining. It's been a great pleasure. For our listeners, be sure to pick up a copy of *Aflame* available now. Thanks again, Pico.

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Pico Iyer: Thank you, James. What fun.

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