

Atchison Blue: A Search for Silence, a Spiritual Home, and a Living Faith

Judith Valente

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Judith Valente's story is reminiscent of the Japanese proverb that encourages us to "fall seven times, stand up eight."

What is it about the mystery of monasteries that draws men and women with a suitcase full of questions to their doors? In her superbly written and probing memoir, *Atchison Blue*, Judith Valente answers that it is finding peace through *conversatio morum*, what the Benedictines call the conversion of life.

Valente is one of those women who worked too much and thought too little. As a Chicago television producer and *Wall Street Journal* writer, Valente admits, "What I lacked in my own life were moments of stillness and silence." She finds herself, literally and figuratively, at a Benedictine monastery in Kansas—Mount St. Scholastica, where in true Christian fashion she discovers she is getting more than she is giving. The book title refers to the monastery's blue stained-glass windows bleached by the Kansas sun and wind.

Valente admits she embodied the driven woman who relentlessly pursued her professional objectives. She acknowledges her naïveté in her second marriage as the rejected stepmother. During her extended stays at the monastery, she begins to understand the more important elements of human life.

Valente presents a series of conversations with several of the sisters who live at the monastery, which lead her slowly to achieving her own *conversatio*. (It is interesting to note that the words "conversion" and "conversation" have the same etymological root.) Valente recounts important events in her life and in the lives of the sisters: failure, misunderstanding, sickness, and the inexplicable presence of death before its time. Her narration follows the tradition of all meditative books in Christian literature—stories that must be told, retold, and reflected upon. The stories entertain, delight, educate, and encourage. They follow in the tradition of reflections on Christian life by Thomas Merton and Thomas Verner Moore that should not only be read but reread.

In an honest appraisal of her own life, Valente realizes that *conversatio* is not easily achieved. While her professional relationships mellow, her extended family quandaries prove to be more intractable. Her story is reminiscent of the Japanese proverb that encourages us to "fall seven times, stand up eight."

Throughout the book, Valente reflects on many writers from many traditions of spirituality. She quotes passages from the rule of St. Benedict that clearly illustrate its ancient wisdom for our modern society. All in all, *Atchison Blue* is a wise and wonderful book.

THOMAS H. BRENNAN (Winter 2014)

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