



Monastery of the Ascension

THE DESERT CHRONICLE

XXX, No. 2 JUNE 2021

Reading and Writing During a Pandemic

By Fr. Hugh Feiss, O.S.B.

IN AN EDITORIAL IN HIS COMMUNITY'S QUARTERLY, LA SCALA, GIULIO METATTINI OF THE MONASTERY OF MADONNA DELLA SCALA IN ITALY WRITES ABOUT FINDING TRACES OF GOD IN literature. Such traces are there because the image of God is impressed ineradicably on the human soul. Even a dissolute person cannot totally uproot his innate longing for God. Literature is concerned with imagination, invention, and creative fantasy. To be sure the biblical story of salvation is about historical facts, but the Bible also contains poetry like the Song of Songs and short stories and fables like the books of Jonah and Judith. Such works are evidence that humans share in the faculty of "sub-creation," that is, a capacity to create received from God the Creator. Poets like Venantius Fortunatus, the authors' of saints' live, poet-mystics like Dante and

John of the Cross wrote with the eyes of faith.

However, even in our time, when much of culture is detached from faith, non-believing authors like Camus and Cormac McCarthy uncover intimations of transcendence. Reading them can both challenge and nurture faith.

With these thoughts in mind, I have asked some writers and readers with connections to the monastery to share their thoughts about writing and reading during the pandemic. They are not famous authors or literary critics, but they enjoy a significant share in the gift of "sub-creation." Their experience of reading and writing in the pandemic may help illuminate our own.

KEEP CALM
AND



READ, READ, READ

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Dear Friends of the Monastery,

Blessings to all. We have reached the beginning of “Ordinary Time” in the church calendar. Our annual calendar reads “springtime”. We look forward to a time of “normal,” meaning *new normal*, but we’re not quite sure what that will be like. Our frame of reference includes past, present and future. In the midst of all, that we can sometimes wonder which way to go.

Jesus gives us an answer: “Come, follow me.” He not only tells us to follow, but he says that he will show us the way and be with us and in us on the journey. How? By the gift of the Holy Spirit.

How can we describe our relationship with the Holy Spirit?

Human words fall short. But Scripture and the Church provide some words that give us plenty to think and pray about. One of them is *water*. “Let anyone who thirsts come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as scripture says: ‘Rivers of living water will flow from within him.’ He said this in reference to the Spirit that those who came to believe in him were to receive.” (John 7, 37-39) Jesus said to Nicodemus: “no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.” (John 3, 5)

Why did Christ say that water is the grace of the Spirit? Because the Spirit is the source of our life in Christ, and life is dependent on water. All living beings depend on water. Without it they cannot exist. Our living of Christ’s life depends on the work of the Spirit.

St. Irenaeus uses a down-to-earth example to help us understand the importance of water: “Like parched ground, which yields no harvest unless it receives moisture, we who are like a waterless tree could never have lived and borne fruit without this abundant rainfall from above... If we are not to be scorched and made unfruitful, we need the dew of God.”

We continue to pray and plan about our future. A lot of you are praying for us. The complexities of growing older are familiar to some of you, so our petitions unite us. Thank you.

May the Spirit that gives us life be with all of you. You are in our prayers daily. Peace and good things.

Fr. Boniface Lautz, O.S.B.
Prior



READING, WRITING AND...COVID-19

By Julie A. Ferraro, Journalist, Yelm, WA

NO ONE NEEDS TO BE TOLD, AFTER MORE THAN A YEAR, HOW THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IMPACTED EVERY INDIVIDUAL on the planet. Monumental in its scope, when the churches closed their doors – bishops sanctioning the shift to livestreamed Masses – not just our minds were shaken, but our souls, as well.

Confinement within the four walls of a house can wreak havoc on mind, body and spirit, for sure. The phrase “cabin fever” definitely applied in those early weeks of lockdown and, in many cases, still does as we continue the long road toward a new normal.

The availability of technology, especially computers, may be cited as a key element in our collective survival of this crisis, and our faith.

Among the Benedictines, almost from the day the state and federal governments announced closures, in-person retreats planned at St. Gertrude Monastery in Cottonwood, Idaho, and St. Placid Priory, Lacey, Washington, went online, thanks to Zoom. Other monasteries joined this trend, with many Lenten gatherings occurring via computer screens.

The only things missing from Sunday Masses, viewed via Facebook or Vimeo, was the Sign of Peace and Holy Communion. Some parishes reported more viewers online than people in the pews prior to the pandemic.

Thus, our souls continued to be nurtured, but what about our minds?

Libraries closed to browsing, a pastime I enjoyed tremendously. As they gradually offered services again, books (as well as DVDs, CDs and other materials) could be requested through the respective websites, with curb-side pick-up available.

The pandemic certainly allowed more time for reading, with online book sales – eBooks and formats suitable for Kindle-type devices included – increasing by leaps and bounds.

Those libraries that offered access to electronic resources, such as Hoopla or Kanopy, allowed their patrons to continue reading, listening or viewing without having to leave home.

Benedictine options for *lectio divina* online, weekly reflections on the Gospels, or listening to Sisters and monks pray the Divine Office brought members of this religious family closer together while separated by considerable distance.

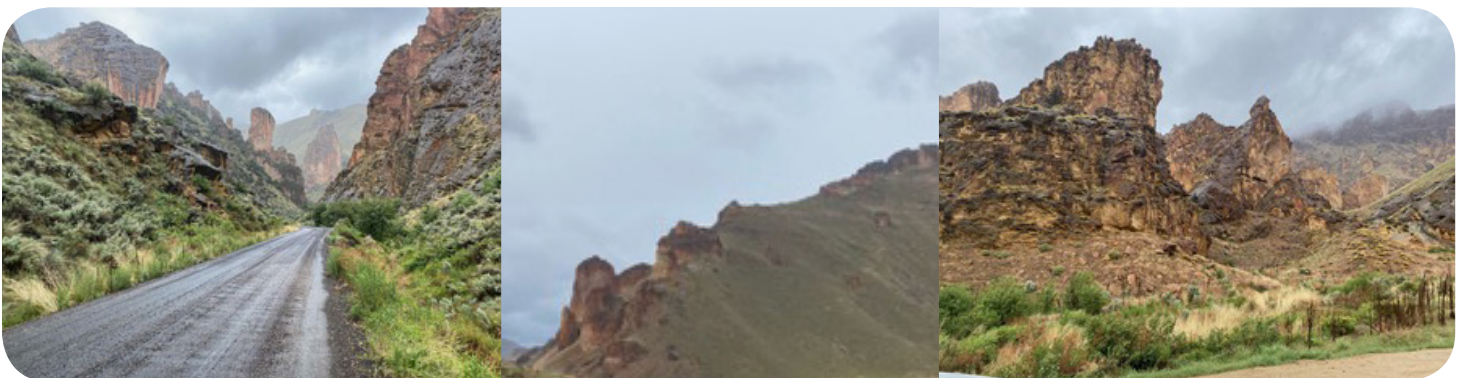
Reading spiritual tomes prompted much writing, as well. Journaling about what transpired during this ordeal helped keep many balanced.

For me, with young grandkids expending their energy in whatever ways possible without being able to interact with their friends, I managed to find time to write dozens of articles for Catholic publications – interviews done via phone, instead of face-to-face (as I prefer it). What leisure time I had in the midst of all this busy-ness, I cranked out a few pieces of fiction, too, for pure enjoyment: mystery stories, mostly.

There is a rare form of comfort in being able to sit and read – or write – in the midst of the turmoil we’ve all endured during these months. Whether holding an actual book, or a device where the words scroll on the screen, the knowledge or enjoyment gained from perusing the paragraphs continues a rich tradition that started millennia ago.

Recording our thoughts, on paper or on a monitor screen, is another such tradition – whether shared with others or retained for our private edification. In the decades ahead, when we look back on this virus that caused such upheaval to every corner of the globe, we will be able to recall how we grew spiritually by browsing those entries.

Going forward, as the pace of life resumes its hectic speed, perhaps we will also remember to expand our horizons through reading and writing, and offer prayers of praise and thanksgiving that we’d been gifted with the resources to make an especially onerous period a bit more bearable. •



THE PANDEMIC CHRONICLES

By Joanne Draper, Instructor, College of Southern Idaho

SOMETIME TOWARD THE END OF MARCH LAST YEAR, LIFE CHANGED. I KNOW I'M NOT THE ONLY ONE WHO FELT AS IF SOMETHING irrevocable was getting lost as the country began locking down because of the COVID-19 virus. The monastery closed on March 21, and a week later, the College of Southern Idaho (CSI), where I teach, decided to finish the rest of the year online. In addition, the knitting group I've belonged to for years disbanded.

Suddenly I had no routine to mark my days. For a creature of habit like me, this was not tolerable, so over the first few weeks of spring, I began developing a new routine. I went for long walks every morning, mostly in the park near my home. It was the first time in my adult life I had time to notice how spring was waking up everything around me.

I began reading a lot more widely. Fortunately, some of my colleagues at CSI and I had formed a book club. We met once a month in a lovely, shaded seating area next to the library on campus. Each month, one member would propose a book to read, and the next month we'd assemble and discuss it, and decide on the next month's book. When the weather got colder, we began meeting indoors in a classroom, but we've now resumed meeting outside.

Before the end of spring semester 2020, I found out I'd be teaching almost strictly online for the rest of the calendar year, starting with the two summer school classes I've taught for the last five years. This meant even more unstructured time, but I soon found some worthy ways to spend my days. I rediscovered the joys of gardening. I also spent many pleasant hours knitting and spinning. By the end of the year, I'd knitted five pairs of socks, and spun approximately 3,000 yards of yarn (so I could knit more socks!)

I've always kept a journal of some kind, but I haven't always been faithful about writing in it. However,

sometime in the early days of lockdown, I began a daily ritual of chronicling my days. It occurred to me I was living through historic and unprecedented times, and it might be interesting to record my impressions and ideas. When I started this project, I titled my journal "Pandemic Chronicles – Volume 1." I had

no idea at the time that, over a year later, I'd still be writing about this. I'm now on Volume 6.

At around 4 in the afternoon, I light a candle, turn on Classic FM (British streaming radio station), and begin my scribbles. Sometimes, I simply write an account of my day so far, and ponder what the evening will bring. Once in a while, I'll do a bit of commentary about something happening in the world. I rant, I complain, but I also rejoice – because even with all that's been happening, there are still reasons for rejoicing. The first sighting of juncos this winter; the park downtown all spangled with colored lights at Christmastime; the re-emergence of plants in my garden; a long, merry phone call with my brother – these and countless other pleasures I wanted to record and remember.

I've written other, more prosaic things as well. For example, I had to re-write the lessons for all three classes I've been teaching on campus to reflect that they're now online. And I tried my hand at pattern-writing – I created a knitted shawl pattern, and putting the instructions in writing stretched me in new and good ways.

I've heard it said if one does something for at least 21 days in a row, it becomes a routine, and should be easy to continue. My journal writing has gone on for longer than that, and it is now firmly embedded in my daily round. It is part creative outlet, part therapy, and all thoroughly enjoyable. This isn't deathless prose I'm creating here – in fact, nobody else will ever see it. It's simply been a way for me to make sense during a time that often didn't make sense at all.

I also try to write a few lines of poetry each day – mostly haiku, mostly related to something I've experienced or thought about recently.

I wrote about activity in my back yard:

Brave junco flitting
Branch to ground and back again
Amid new snowfall

And about current weather conditions:

Magic in the air –
Snowflakes swirling and dancing
Winter symphony

My reflections ranged from the sublime:

We rise from ashes
Becoming what we were born
To be – His children

To the ordinary:

Sheltered inside, safe
From wind and storm, wondering
What will this day bring?

To the ridiculous:

Clumsy in the dark
And now my toe is broken
And it hurts like hell!

My verses bring back memories of little moments in time that make me smile to remember:

Music on the street
Niños play, abuelo watches
Perfect afternoon



If I haul “The Pandemic Chronicles” down from the shelf 20 years from now, I wonder what my reaction will be? How much will the world have changed by then, and how much of that change was the direct result of this time? And on a more personal level, how much has it changed me?

As I write this, I am a few weeks out from my second COVID vaccination, which means I can be a little less isolated, and have a lot more peace of mind. I’m looking forward to visiting my brother in June – my first trip out of Idaho in more than two years. I can get back to some of my old rituals and routines, like celebrating at Trailing of the Sheep in Ketchum this October. And it is more than time for my knitting group to get back together again.

I managed to fill up six journals during a time when I rarely emerged from my house. I hope I will carry on with this practice even as I begin to step out into the wide world again. •



“ENDURE, AND SAVE YOURSELVES FOR BETTER DAYS!”

By Ronald E. Pepin, Classicist, Retired professor of literature, Colchester, CT.

“**D**URATE, ET VOSMET REBUS SERVATE SECUNDIS.” THESE WORDS FROM THE *AENEID*, THE ROMAN EPIC BY VERGIL, CONCLUDE A BRIEF SPEECH OF ENCOURAGEMENT BY THE HERO, AENEAS, TO HIS COMRADES WHEN THEY ARE AT THE LOWEST POINT IN

their fortunes. They have lost their homeland to havoc and war, undertaken a perilous journey, and are now shipwrecked and stranded. What must be done? “Endure, and save yourselves for better days!”

Early in the Covid 19 pandemic, I adopted this motto for my family, and they humored me by embracing it. We determined to endure our confinement, separation and struggle until better days return. We have had recourse to different means of doing this. For me, reading and writing have provided comfort and consolation. I have always regarded both as a healthy and wholesome use of time, and a beneficial exercise of mind, just as walking is for the body. Saint Benedict affirmed this value when, in his *Rule*, he prescribed daily reading for monks, and ordered that during Lent “each one is to receive a book from the library, and is to read the whole of it straight through.” [RB 48.15] For me, the stay-at-home protocols of the pandemic actually increased my time available for reading.

My reading has been varied. For a few hours each morning, I worked on a long-term project: reading and translating Latin texts. My purpose was to make a medieval collection of miracle stories available in English. The vast *Dialogue on Miracles* by Caesarius of Heisterbach, a 13th century Cistercian monk, comprises 746 stories of varying lengths. His purpose in relating them was to edify and instruct novices in his community and in the order. A modern reader will undoubtedly find the tales

fascinating, usually inspiring, often bizarre, and sometimes even humorous.

My wife, Beth, devours mysteries. I marvel at how such a gentle, patient person can delight in murder and mayhem. My leisure reading leans toward nonfiction, particularly history and biography. Works in these genres tend to underscore the fact that no one escapes hardships in life, and that their causes are manifold, including wars and pandemics. But in such books, we are equally exposed to acts of courage, faith and perseverance that enlighten our minds and strengthen our hearts. During the pandemic, I have also found comfort in reading Sacred Scripture. In the course of a long life, I have probably read the entire Bible, with one exception: Maccabees. I added those two books to my list, to my profit and pleasure. Since music is a balm to the soul (well, most music!), I have played many of my classical records during the pandemic, along with the ethereal airs of Enya. Handel’s oratorio, “Judas Maccabeus,” gave me special pleasure.

The physical act of writing can be tedious, especially when one employs the antiquated method of pencil and pad. However, writing out a translation from one language to another in this way seems conducive to reflection and close attention to what is being transcribed. Then, after review and

See “ENDURE”, cont. on page 8



"AND THE WORLD WAS CALM"

By Ellen Martin, New York and Detroit, Specialist in medieval literature

WHY DOES MORE TIME TO ONESELF NOT TRANSLATE INTO MORE READING? IT TURNS OUT THAT what people around you are doing affects the rhythm of your own life. Everything has sagged, and sagged for everybody.

But even useless activity sustains the possibility of activity. In reading, I follow my mother's advice: Read anything. Read the back of the cereal box. Read sewing machine instructions. Just read. This liberates one from ambition.

One turns one's small attention to newspapers, catalogues, and the road atlas. A map will lead the most disengaged brain to some moment of curiosity. David McCullough's *The Path between the Seas* has excellent maps, in addition to what Alice of Wonderland called the "pictures and conversation" without which books are of no use. It is also as large as its topic: the Panama Canal. I am half way through this vivid account of the people who got the Canal going, got it into trouble, and—I think—got it built. I'm not sure it's gotten built because I haven't finished the book. Yet. It's been resting since October.

But, meantime, I read McCullough's *Brave Companions*, essays on people and places he learned of while writing other books. Biographies keep us in touch with other people, and short pieces fit the wearied brain that wants nourishment, but is tired of cooking.

For deep nourishment in small format, try Timothy Snyder's *On Tyranny*, a handbook on recognizing tyranny and reclaiming liberty, distilled into brief chapters by a scholar of 20th-century fascism, or his *Our Malady*, a memoir of near-death experiences in hospitals, and what he learned about freedom during a debilitating illness.

Consider giving a book away: as you look it over, you may find yourself reading something you'd forgotten you were interested in.

Or read about the act of writing. Having worked 45 years on a history of LBJ's search for power, and attained the age of 83, Robert Caro "did the math," and took time out to set down, in *Working*, the encounters that have led him through the means of investigation, and the ways of composing narratives. How he interviewed LBJ's brother, or how he was schooled by his first newspaper editor, are moving pictures of the human realities underlying all writing.

Books will wait for you. My comfort reading, the latest Alexander McCall Smith, waited three months between the buying and the reading. Brooding took place. Staring out the window happened. But when my hand reached out, the book was there.

The only classic I've polished off has been Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, fifty years after being assigned to read it. I'm glad I waited. How much more impressed - by the dynamic, sustained moral resolve of the outwardly dark but inwardly colorful, publicly shamed but privately knowing Hester Prynne - I was last fall than I would have been in high school. It was not my reading, but Hawthorne's writing. All I had to do was find some errand I wanted to put off, and his musical sentences reshaped the day's time.

But when I really had to read Aelred of Rievaulx's *On the Saints of Hexham Church*, I first delayed by reading two articles on them by other scholars, and then one day, I took a bus, and the book was with me, and the rhythm of the bus, its stop-and-go progress down Broadway in New York City, got me reading. I stopped when the bus stopped. I resumed when the bus resumed. I read all 43 pages over a week of bus rides. I commend this method: the progress is slow, but think of how long you enjoy the sensation of doing right.

Writing, I rarely manage until I attain that mix of forfeited ambition, and distracting myself from some meaningful imagined project, that leads one to compose small things to mask the risk of writing powerful things. This is OK because the possibility that you'll write something powerful (like the infinite monkeys who eventually type Hamlet) remains. It's just not your reason for living, or writing, anymore. Writing has a life of its own, and that life will not always coincide with yours. Or with mealtimes. So while you're not writing, read. Or dust. Read something to someone over the phone. Let someone read to you. Re-read: *Alice in Wonderland*, old Christmas cards. Reading Laura Ingalls Wilder's *The Long Winter* again gave me a bracing instance of resolute endurance during cold, hungry times whose end is not in sight.

Read dictionary definitions. Recipes. A psalm you think you've memorized. The Gettysburg Address. Obits. Read anything. Read later.

And the world was calm. The truth in a calm world,
In which there is no other meaning, itself
Is calm, itself is summer and night, itself
Is the reader leaning late and reading there.

"The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm" --
Wallace Stevens. •





Monastery Chronicle

By Fr. Boniface Lautz, OSB

MARCH 2021

We have all managed to get vaccinated with two doses. And there were no major side effects. There were a few sore arms and some low energy experiences, but we've survived. Now, it is allergy season. We will feel it.

Our Lenten routine included presentations on theology or spirituality on Wednesday evenings. This year we had presentations on St. Paul's writings, given by Luke Timothy Johnson. He was an articulate and very interesting presenter.

On the agricultural front, one Saturday we had help in pruning and trimming trees from ten volunteers. John Wasko organized and directed the day. We discussed plans for the vegetable garden. Since, for now, we are not hosting groups, our need for fresh produce is diminished. Tomatoes and peppers seem to be in demand. The farmers have been tilling and planting on the farm. Since, we have had some days of 70 degrees, and some mornings of 25 degrees, and heavy winds, it is a complicated process.

Mid-month, Bishop Christensen and Fr. Moises Vivar, MSW, visited us briefly, along with several Boise priests and two Missionaries. Fr. Moises is the Superior of the Missionary Servants of the Word. He and the two MSW priests were on the way to the Eastern Deanery, where they are ministering in parishes. It was a pleasure to see them and we look forward to a return visit.

Fr. Hugh presided at a funeral in Unity, OR. Lu Ann traveled by air to see family. Both returned without ill effects.

The transferred Feast of St. Benedict was pretty much "another day". We had a

monthly community meeting. And it snowed in the morning.

We have concerns about how or when to open up. In the meantime, our spiritual ministry is confessions, spiritual direction and telephone conversations. Fr. Hugh keeps regular contact with Oblates, our Sunday Masses are available virtually.

APRIL 2021

The services for the Triduum and Easter began the month and were shared on the Internet.

We decided to "open" for weekday Mass. We're still not opening for Sunday Mass. We're trying to take all the precautions to provide a safe environment

April 27 was a red letter day. The lawn got mowed for the first time this year. It will be an almost weekly event until October. We're fortunate to have someone who has it down to a routine, so it doesn't take a large amount of time. It is a large lawn. Those of us who used to do it would take a little longer now.

MAY 2021

Hospitality is still limited. We have many inquiries about when that will change. Our answer is always, "Thank you. We'll let you know." The only visitors who just show up and expect to stay are the deer. Nine of them appeared on May 8. They started by looking in the vegetable garden area. We hope they will be around until late summer.

Fr. Hugh had a birthday on the 8th, and a name day on the 11th. He also participated via ZOOM in the Kalamazoo medieval congress. We celebrated Ascension Thursday on May 13th. We changed our daily order to

allow for some additional festivity.

LuAnn provided some extra treats and a marvelous dinner. We also had the Mass of the feast on Sunday. It gave us the chance to celebrate twice!

One Sunday, we had a pleasant visit from the Missionary Servants who are ministering in the Eastern Deanery. With them were some of their younger members who were participating in retreats locally. They were all new to Idaho.

We've continued to "donate" unused and unneeded items to local organizations. The recipients have graciously received them. We hope they can find folks who can use them. We are finishing up work on the backlog of books for the library. We may have some sort of book "sale" or giveaway later in the summer.

We had some 80 degree days, but it is not uncommon to see ice on the sprinkler lines in the morning.

Br. Sylvester received a nice pin signifying him as the donor of 25 gallons of blood. Congratulations Br. Sylvester!

Some of us went to see the light show at Shoshone Falls one Sunday night. Colored lights are reflected off the falls. It's quite an event. There were hundreds of spectators. The admission fees help support local organizations.

On June 2 Fr. Kenneth will have a birthday. On June 5, Fr. Boniface will have a name day. •





THE DESERT CHRONICLE

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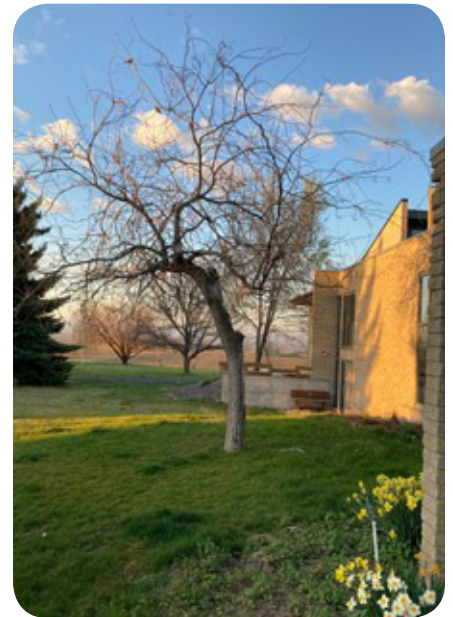
“ENDURE”, *from page 5*

revision, I word-process the text: a modern conclusion to an archaic beginning.

My favorite writing during the Corona confinement has been corresponding with my Pen Pal. Kathryn is my nine year old granddaughter. We have exchanged a host of snail mail letters and cards during the pandemic, and they have enabled us to stay close in a time of enforced separation. We trade news and views, ask questions and give replies, and never fail to express our deep and abiding affection for each other. And she keeps me up to date on the mischievous activities of her two brothers and two family dogs. A special treat comes my way when she includes an issue of her own little newsletter, which is packed with charming reports on the weather, favorite

books, foods and flowers, and the news from Saint Denis/Saint Columba school. The latest bit is that SHE read the most books in her class for the Read-a-Thon Fundraiser. In the last year, Kate has at times expressed alarm at the pandemic and its awful consequences, but her reading and writing have helped her to endure, and to cheer her grandfather as well.

I recently finished my latest book: Jon Meacham’s biography of Thomas Jefferson, a noted bibliophile. Meacham reports (p.47) that after the family home burned to the ground on February 1, 1770, the devastated Jefferson received a warm letter of consolation from George Wythe, his former teacher, which concluded with this admonition: “Durate, et vosmet rebus servate secundis.” •



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