Wisdom from the desert

By Chaplain Corey Thornton

In the fourth century, a great movement occurred amongst Christians living in Egypt, Syria and Palestine. It was the migration of many from the ever-growing cities of those regions to the austere deserts surrounding them. It was an experiment, or, more aptly, a type of pilgrimage, to practice ancient forms of monastic life as followers of Jesus Christ and his teachings.

It might be tempting to think that people who would take such extreme measures were either very spiritually-minded or heavily vested in religion, but such was not always the case. Many were not spiritual leaders or religious scholars of any note; some were even illiterate. Many left normal lives with families and typical jobs. They left in order to devote themselves to a monastic lifestyle which involved living in small groups or alone. They would do essential work to sustain their lives and devote the remainder of their time to prayer and contemplation.

The way was not always an easy one. The governing authorities were threatened by the large numbers leaving the cities because they would become exempt from paying taxes. The popularity of the movement threatened the solitude of the monks who were visited by many tourists and aspirants to the movement. In the end, a lot was sacrificed but a lot was gained in the lives of these desert fathers and their followers.

I have recently had a number of opportunities to think about the desert fathers. One was coming across a collection of their teachings called, The Paradise of the Desert Fathers. Reading the stories and teachings of these monks and nuns has had a positive influence on me at a time in my life when things often seem perplexing and complicated. I was struck by how assured and aware was their sense of identity. Their teachings were not complicated but simple. They were not burdened with validating their message beyond what they could exhibit with their own lives. Their concern seems to have been with expressing the fruits of extended spans of time and focus invested in prayer and contemplation.

I have often wondered what it would be like to devote one's life to this practice; what transcendental condition of heart and mind would that produce? It was this curiosity that motivated my study.

What struck me most is how little they needed in order to live mature and meaningful lives. Often it seems that our society's method of solving problems is to throw information at them. We see this when we find ourselves sitting in front of PowerPoint presentations of statistics and data on who, what and why unfavorable things happen in our society. I believe the recent trend towards teaching through dramas comes from some who realize that more data is not always as helpful as we might wish for it to be and that much about human behavior stems from our sense of morality and ethics instead of from the statistics measuring our morale failures.

It appears the reliance on data stems from our connection to the enlightenment belief that humanity can improve primarily through reason and the empirical method. In many areas this has proven helpful, particularly in the sciences and the practice of medicine. But we remain baffled at our inability to improve our collective sense of morality and ethical treatment of one another. The all too familiar topics of domestic violence, sexual assault, suicide and homicide, carry a lot of pain and frustration for many and can be discouraging for those who cannot see a solution to them.

One thing seems likely, that while it may prove helpful to a degree, no amount of empirical data will ever completely eradicate the violent and sinful nature of humanity.

It is true that these are the extreme examples of our society's ills. The majority have not committed these heinous acts. But many of us do contend with our own shortcomings, such as stress, anger, depression and burnout, and oftentimes we have prescribed the same solution—more education. For all of these we are led to believe that we fail because we have not learned the right information. My generation was taught by G. I. Joe cartoons that problems are caused by not knowing, "and knowing is half the battle."

The monastic movement of the desert fathers was antithetical to our modern problem solving. For them, the improvement of the individual and the advancement of the human species did not require more stuff—more information, more technology, more education, more money, more power, etc.—they instead encouraged giving up stuff to create time and room for self-discovery, service to others and devotion to God. Somehow they were able to see how our relentless pursuit to acquire more and more can undermine our spiritual connection to the Divine. With the breakdown of the spiritual life comes dissatisfaction with ourselves and with our assessment of the value of life. For them, a life lived with God was the only authentic and healthy life. They saw their former lives as having been filled with busyness, noise, distractions, and selfish ambitions that left little room for God. They left these attachments behind to go to the desert. What they had to show for it might be best illustrated in a few of their teachings and stories:

The most prominent religious leader of Alexandria, Theophilus, the archbishop of the Church in that city visited the monastic community in Scetis. On his visit the brethren came together and said to Abba Pambo, "Say a word or two to the bishop, that his soul may be edified in this place." The old man replied, "If he is not edified by my silence, there is no hope that he will be edified by my words."

Abba Nilus said, "Prayer is the seed of gentleness and the absence of anger."

Abba Zeno said, "If a man wants God to hear his prayer quickly, then before he prayers for anything else, even his own soul, when he stand and stretches out his hands towards God, he must pray with all his heart for his enemies. Through this action god will ear everything that he asks."

What from the lives of the Desert fathers is for us? Not many will choose to leave their lives to go pray in the desert, but these serve as a reminder that we posses all that we need to live meaningful and healthy lives. If anything is likely it is that we have accepted too much and have left no room for self-discovery, our service to others and for the Divine. In conclusion, let us remember the words of Saint Augustine who once said that God is always trying to give good things to us, but our hands are too full to receive them.

Pre-separation counseling training announced

From Commander, Navy Installations Command Public Affairs

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Commander, Navy Installations Command (CNIC) recently announced the 2012-2013 schedule for Pre-Separation Counseling Training Course.

The curriculum was designed to establish Department of Defense (DoD) minimum standards for the delivery of pre-separation counseling to all military personnel transitioning from active duty.

"Ensuring a smooth transition for our separating and retiring service members is paramount," said Risė Ruhl, CNIC Military Support Section Lead. "This course provides a stronger, more comprehensive understanding of the checklist and its importance for career counselors. By preparing our Command Career Counselors (CCC), they can start service members and their families on the right path to their transition."

The course provides participants with in-depth knowledge and understanding of the law, DoD guidance, and pre-separation counseling time lines.

Ruhl also said pre-separation counseling is the first step for Sailors getting out of the Navy and career counselors who have taken the course can better prepare service members as they begin transitioning.

Attendance in this course is limited to active duty Navy CCCs and personnel holding NEC-9588, in the pay grade of E6 to E9. Petty officer second class career counselors may also be able to attend on a case-by-case basis. Participants must have at least one year remaining on their present tour and currently performing primary duties as a Command Career Counselor. Also, Reserve Component Navy Counselors and/or personnel holding NEC-9588 at locations with large concentration of Full Time Support (FTS) personnel are welcome to attend.

While the majority of these training classes take place at the National Learning Center in Denver, this year an off-site training will be held in Norfolk. All participants must submit a completed nomination form signed by an authorized official at the command. Forms can either be faxed or sent electronically. All nomination forms must be received no later than 60 days prior to the scheduled class with the exception of the classes convening in September and October 2012. Travel to the National Learning Center is provided at no cost to the command.

The training dates in Denver are as follows: Sept. 17-21, 2012; Oct. 22-26, 2012, Dec. 3-7, 2012; Jan. 7-11, 2013; Feb. 4-8, 2013; 25 Feb. 25 - Mar. 1, 2013; Apr. 15-19, 2013; and May 6-10, 2013.

The training dates for the Norfolk Off-site location is Nov. 5-9, 2012.

Note that the travel day to Denver is Sunday prior to the course and return travel on Friday after graduation. Graduates are advised to make travel arrangements for the afternoon.

For more information on the Pre-Separation Counselor Training Course personnel contact Commander, Navy Installations Command Force Career Counselor NCCM (SW/AW/SS) Michael Cheshier at 202-433-3072 or e-mail at michael.cheshier@navy.mil.

CFAY MWR theaters digital 3-D projector upgrade scheduled

By Joe Schmitt, CFAY Public Affairs

Morale Welfare and Recreation (MWR) Division theaters on board Commander Fleet Activities Yokosuka and its respective housing detachments is scheduled to be upgraded with new digital projectors that can play 3-D movies much like patrons would find in state-side theaters.

Currently, upgrades are scheduled to be completed in early to mid August.

In order to complete the upgrades, the movie theaters need to be closed for a few days while the new projectors are installed.

The current closure schedule is as follows:

- Fleet Theater – Aug. 7 and 8.
- Benny Decker Theater – Aug. 9 and 10.
- Negishi Theater – Aug. 10, 11 and 12.

When the theaters reopen, on Aug. 9, 11 and 17 respectively, each will have one free movie screening.

The schedule of free shows is not out yet, but the theaters have already received recent movies like "*Prometheus*," "*Dr. Seuss's The Lorax*," and they plan on reshowing James Cameron's 2009 "*Avatar*."

Regular 2-D versions of movies will still play. Customers can expect to pay $2 more than the regular price for 3-D movies.

However, on average, CFAY movie patrons will save about $15 to $20 per ticket for seeing the same movies at other off-base theaters.

Look for the full theater upgrade story and reopening in the Aug. 17 issue of the Seahawk-Umitaka newspaper.