

SPIRITUAL REFUGEES: FROM SHAMBHALA TO ST. WALBURGA

Our explorer headed out to escape her identity... and found she needed it more than she thought.

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I'm weirdly obsessed with religions and the philosophies that poke at their theories.

Raised a fundamentalist Christian, I have always been fascinated by the Catholic Church's 2,000-year history of monastic living and sanctuaries from the world, a tradition that my own religion at best scoffed at, at worst, condemned as sinful.

As a child I fantasized about a sanctuary from the world, an escape from society and the monotony of religion, which I thought should be more mysterious and ritualistic. My obsession coincided with a determination to become a nun until I discovered the opposite sex; after that I read with more detached interest about celibate, sequestered life and its long-lasting religious dynasties. As I grew up a writer and began to travel, I visited a beautiful Scottish Benedictine monastery and wrote about the Carmelite nuns of Littleton.

My curiosity of Zen Buddhism began in high school when my writing mentor, Sarah Quigley, shared her devotion with me. Seeking something different from Christianity, Buddhism led me to read Eastern texts and poetry, and dwell on beautiful quotes from Hafiz and Rumi (don't we all have that phase at some point?).

I continued to nurture an interest in these religious traditions, even as I slowly debated and reasoned my way out of any religious affiliation or faith, even when I turned to philosophy to fill the void left by my lost faith.

In late summer, I kept mulling over the humanist philosophy of Maurice Blanchot, a reclusive 20th century French writer in my mind, like good wine washing over my palate.

Although Blanchot had many friends and even an adopted daughter, Cidalia, he thought the only true way to relate to and interact with a person is to meet anonymously, outside of a social context. He believed the social context lends you identity and creates boundaries and expectations between you and others. By transcending the social context, you shed those identities and assume a kind of anonymity.

One hot, clear Wednesday in August I concocted a plan to

explore Blanchot's theory and get in touch with my own anonymity while gratifying some of my wanderlust for a bit of magic on Colorado's roads. My destination was two unique spiritual sanctuaries tucked away in Northern Colorado: Shambhala Mountain Center, a Buddhist retreat and the Abbey of St. Walburga, a Benedictine monastery. Surely here, I thought, largely removed from the normal social context, I could put aside my worldly identities and attain a degree of anonymity. Surely here, I could relate with others on a human level.

Unplugging and driving north toward Red Feather Lakes, I'm excited to feed my two like-but-unlike passions: Zen Buddhism and Benedictine monasticism.

I see my daily landscape differently as I mosey down I-25. My destination a couple hours away, I settle into a driving mode, enjoying the sights that roll past.

I pass the mundane chains of outdoor malls in North Denver and Thornton, its endless urban sprawl linking Denver and Fort Collins, creating a dystopic metropolis. I see puffy white clouds and mountains scraped of nearly all their snow by the summer drought. I drink in the vast hay-yellow fields that are sown with invisible life, little corn zygotes and seedlings. Patchwork squares of green and yellow farmland spread over the rolling hills from Denver to Ft. Collins and to the west the mountains beckon.

I have no expectations for the day, except an anticipation of exploring a part of Colorado I have never seen. A mild sense of euphoria and escape overtake me. I imagine, just by leaving the city limits, I am getting closer to my anonymity, which will enable me to recreate myself outside of my normal social sphere in these refuges.

US Route 287 crosses Colorado and Wyoming along that indefinite edge between plains and mountains. Driving along, I see plenty of evergreens unscathed by the recent fires, huge mounds of boulders, and sloping pastures for wild horses. Turning on a dirt road toward Shambhala, the success of my day—at least for today—is measured in how much dust I kick up, not how long I sit at my desk.





Like its Buddhist-centered philosophy, Shambhala is path-oriented. A winding two-mile trek marked with colorful fluttering prayer flags and tall thin metal posts leads to a huge temple, the focal point of the Buddhist center: the Great Stupa of Dharmakaya. Other paths meander through its huge acreage of land, ideal for solitary hikers, perfect for contemplation and meditation.

The prayer flags and eclectic architectural layout give the land a very natural, unplanned feel. Green tents and trailers stand by modern structures with beautiful tawny wood and red-painted pillars, juxtaposing with pell-mell yurts and huts. It feels like the town was not built, but grew organically.

As I wend my way through the land, I can almost imagine I am hiking through Tibet or Nepal, except for the columbine flowers, warm air and relatively mild terrain, and trail signs posted in English.

As I walk up the steps to the stupa, I stop at a small sacrificial shrine. Worldly goods and symbols of wealth are piled on, tied on, or laid at its feet. I reach inside my pockets, looking for jewelry or change, but I have hiked up with my wedding ring, and without any money.

I lean in for a closer look at the shrine. Aside from some dollar bills and change, a lot of the things left there really don't rep-

resent money or wealth; I see key chains, a King Soopers card, an empty Altoids tin.

I remember the friendship bracelet I'm wearing, given to me by a friend. I take it off, then hesitate.

"Does it mean something special to you?" another pilgrim of the stupa asks me. You are supposed to give up something important.

I answered by tying it onto one of the shrine's spokes.

When I get back to my car, I feel silly. I want my bracelet back.

Having determined to temporarily relieve myself of my regular identity at Shambhala, I assume an identity of just another Buddhist pilgrim, seeking enlightenment and liberation from the stupa, which is said to "liberate upon seeing." Removed from my regular social context, here is another one that holds its own expectations. Is sacrificing a small part of myself the price of relating or *sangha* (community) that I am looking for?

I know why people choose to live on the beautiful, peaceful land; simultaneous solitude and community, maybe to shed the expectations of urban society. Here expectations lie not in wealth or looks—maybe instead in a displayed lack of wealth—but in specific beliefs and behavior. Many of the staff and guests look



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exactly as you'd expect: tie-dye clothing, Buddhist symbols, heads of dreadlocks and yoga pants abound.

At Shambhala I feel easily accepted by resident staff and guests. They glance me over and award me with welcoming smiles, nods and slight hand gestures that they tell me I fit here. I feel at home as I walk the land and eat lunch with them, like I could have grown out of the Shambhala ground along with the yurts. This mutual comfort is based on the assumption I am one of them and on the silent expectation I identify with Buddhist values and beliefs. Though I am only there for a few hours, I feel these expectations heavily.

After lunch, it gets cold and I pull on the ratty blue Hollister sweatshirt I usually travel with. Like many odd pieces of my wardrobe, this is not an intentional look, but a relic of my younger sister's high school days; I dug it out of her closet when she moved away to college. Although I always feel silly wearing "HOLLISTER" so prominently printed on my chest, I've never found one as warm or cozy. It clashes loudly with the others' attire.

"You didn't strike me as a Hollister girl," a guest jokes.

"I'm not, really," I say, slightly abashed. Maybe I do want sangha more than anonymity, I think, but I put this sangha aside and resume my search for anonymity as I travel on to St. Walburga.

Monasteries are notoriously difficult to find. They hide behind fences, in trees and mountains, up long driveways, occasionally under rocks, and when all else fails, in plain sight. When I finally find St. Walburga, the most beautiful, tidy monastery I've ever seen, I am enchanted by it. It is a huge beautiful building with many rooms and an indoor chapel. Built with German style architecture, it has gray stucco and sharp angles. Eichstatt abbey of Germany established an abbey in Boulder in 1935 in case nuns needed to escape Hitler's Germany, and it later moved here to Virginia Dale.

Beautifully manicured, the flowers and gardens are works of art. Among the landscaping, small patron saints, such as St. Fiacre, St. Isadore, patron saints of gardening and agriculture, stand where garden gnomes might in a secular garden. Its lush green fields are mown flat. Beyond the abbey lie gardens, green houses and orchards that the sisters work twice a day in jeans, t-shirts, and muddied cowgirl boots. Everything here is perfectly ordered. Whether this is a reflection of the abbey's German roots or its Catholic background, I'm not sure.

Though Benedictines, among all monastic orders, are known for their hospitality, the nuns have not responded to any of my requests for an interview, so I am surprised by their relative openness as I wander their property. As it grows close to 6 p.m.,



a spry nun in a colorful habit and apron walks her bike back to the abbey and welcomes visitors wandering about the grounds.

I detect some sense of humor among the sisters when I discover St. Peter Park, a small bench next to a giant, 6-foot tall boulder sitting in the field. After all, Peter means rock.

At precisely 6 p.m., a novice bolts from the front door of the abbey with large plastic red earmuffs clamped tightly to her ears. I can't divine her purpose, but I watch as her black habit flies behind her like a kite and she sprints to the small bell tower. She begins to vigorously ring the bell, starting the call to Mass.

A small part of Mass is read in Latin. Fluent in neither Latin nor Catholicism, it is almost incomprehensible to me. The nuns have great voices, but I long for the meditative Gregorian chants that repeat a Latin phrase in slow, loud resonating tones.

Like Shambhala, St. Walburga offers many paths through its land. The most popular is the Way of the Cross trail with small plaques depicting a dozen of the scenes from Christ's walk to the site of his death, the Hill of Golgotha.

I have to follow the rules at St. Walburga and wear long pants, even on such a hot day. Strange that I go to these places to disconnect from society, yet I still have to acquiesce to specific rules. These religious refuges and societies are perhaps more forgiving, more accepting, but are still built along similar precepts

as society. Did I forget that religion, sometimes a refuge from society, has often been the most political aspect of society and the well from whence society draws its rules?

I manage to connect with other visitors and establish the anonymity I sought as I follow these rules. Interestingly enough, I do this, not by working or re-creating the normal social contexts, but through food.

We all come to the table at St. Walburga as equals, but I soon learn our way of relating is through establishing our identity.

"So what do you do?" an older woman named Sarah asks me after the meal.

She is asking who I am. Which identity do I present her with? Struggling writer? Swim coach? Caregiver to the disabled?

"I am a human being," might be the answer at Shambhala, or "I am a sinner, or child of God," at St. Walburga, but she means what I do in the world and my answer will tell her who I am, my place in the world, and what kind of person I am.

I say them all, representing to her my many entry points into the world and my community. Because, this is me.

Sarah tells me she works at a university promoting early breast cancer screening and researching why women don't seek help for lumps until too late. Her soft-spoken manner is calming. We may never have met if not for our shared desire for anonym-

ity at St. Walburga, yet we still relate according to our identities in the real world.

Blanchoth theorized that full removal from societies' contexts was necessary to wholly relate to one another, but I found my identity and labels harder to shed—and new identities even harder to avoid. Ultimately, oppressive as they might seem, we relate in spite of, and often through these identities.

Finding that we can't fully shed our identities here, maybe these spiritual refuges are not much different than other community-gathering places. Perhaps sanctuaries and centers of community are one and the same, existing not only in temples or cathedrals, but also in its concert venues or campgrounds, or atop a Fourteener.

So why do we visit these sanctuaries? The vital element in all these places—campgrounds and monasteries alike—is the sublime nature surrounding them; the reason we visit these spaces is that they represent time away and distance from the tedium of our daily lives. In the end, maybe the important part is not finding—or losing—oneself, but a necessary escape from the quotidian to discover new places and new people. ☸

LOCATIONS:

Shambhala Mountain Center is located at 4921 County Rd 68-C, Red Feather Lakes, 80545. The Great Stupa is open to visitors daily from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., with a suggested donation of \$10 per person. Lunch is available from 12:30 p.m. to 1:30 p.m. for \$10 per person. Shambhala offers weekend retreats for mindful living, yoga, and the contemplative arts. Lodging options include private rooms and bathrooms, private rooms with shared bathrooms, dorm rooms, and platform tents, from \$70-\$220 per person per night.

www.shambhalamountaincenter.org

The Benedictine Abbey of St. Walburga is located at 1029 Benedictine Way, Virginia Dale, 80536. The abbey has a retreat house for individuals and groups for \$65 per person per night with 3 meals included. Visitors can also use the retreat house for day use only for \$20 per person, lunch included. The house offers simple amenities, with single rooms and shared bath and shower facilities. There is a microwave and refrigerator available. Most retreats are unstructured, but the abbey offers some specific retreats focused on or contemplative art. The abbey offers groups space for lectures, conferences or group prayer. Day visitors are welcome, but some areas are off-limits. www.walburga.org

