

# IMPRES- SIONS AND EXPRES- SIONS

## CLOISTERED LIVING

In the interest of disturbing the reader as little as possible, this volume really ought to consist of nothing but blank pages. On second thought, a reader might well become uneasy at encountering an absence of words to read in a book such as this.

While it might provide a moment's pause, I suspect the void would rapidly fill with unease, mingled with irritation and disappointment. No: In order to foster calm it is surely best to lead you, as a reader, along the path of the familiar format of the book, enabling you word by word, minute by minute, to let your mind follow my meanderings on a single concept: calm.

These reflections are taking shape at San Cataldo, a centuries-old convent on the Amalfi Coast in Italy, where I have come to find peace and quiet. In this tranquil setting I can write, really delve into my topic and think at length. Some would say it's too calm here, others that it's not calm enough, but for me this retreat is the perfect place to work.

My study cell is on the lower floor, next to the bathrooms, where handsome shoulders of bare bedrock jut through the white walls. Perched 500 metres above sea level, the restored convent overlooks the bay and the town of Ravello, across the gorge. My mind soars as I gaze at the mass of weathered mountains whose solemn, unmoving aspects have defined this landscape since time immemorial.

The high-ceilinged rooms are decorated in gentle shades of grey and green – except for the bedspread, with its jarring contrast of dark blue and snow-white squares. I've stashed it in the closet and replaced it with a green-patterned scarf of my own.

It is April, so few flowers are blooming in the cloistered garden. The exceptions include a profusion of lavender-blue wisteria, a bed of white lilies of the valley and the occasional deep blue iris. Little noise penetrates the massive walls, which also prevent the spring warmth outside from reaching me. For days my cell stays chilly with winter's cold. I have no choice but to turn on the electric fan heater, but my ears soon get used to its constant hum. I finally stop noticing it at all, and remain calm and unperturbed.

I am here with 11 other guests. Each of us is working individually on our own project. This makes mealtimes an important and carefully choreographed part of our social lives. The first thud on the gong means 'ten minutes to go', either till lunch at 1 o'clock or dinner at 7.30. The second thud means 'take your seats, please'. This way we don't have to keep track of the time ourselves.

The matron changes the seating each evening to vary

the conversation. The kitchen staff bring large platters to either end of the oval dining table. We pass the platters, always to the right, and they are collected at the opposite end of the table. *At first these routines seem artificial, but over time they create rhythm, predictability and a sense of calm.*

San Cataldo offers a blend of visual, auditory and social calm that provides me with the optimum conditions for working creatively and immersively. I am convinced that my thinking is better, deeper and more focused when I am not interrupted by new, urgent tasks, and pings and notifications from my phone, email and calendar app, all of which tends to make me feel like I never quite finish what I set out to do.

I normally work from my office in Denmark, as a researcher at Aarhus University, but by abandoning my routines and travelling to San Cataldo, I have staged the onset of calm, and I anticipate it. We all know how often the world is shaped by the way we consciously think about it. Sitting here, 1,750 kilometres from my home, I imagine how a thousand years' worth of residents, all cultivating calm and contemplation in this place, have saturated the very fabric of its walls.

San Cataldo became a Danish-owned work retreat in 1924, but for 900 years before that it was a working convent where Catholic nuns immersed themselves in prayer as a community, following the meticulously detailed 'Rule of Saint Benedict', which was set out in the sixth century by Benedict of Nursia at a monastery he founded

between Rome and Naples. Typically, nuns were unmarried daughters of wealthy local families, many from the nearby town of Scala. A common saying in Italy was *Aut virum, aut murum*, ‘either a man or a wall’; if a girl did not find a man, her only alternative was a convent.

In fact, nuns were married, not physically to any mortal man but metaphorically to Christ. The bishop would symbolically place a ‘ring of faith’ on a novice’s finger to witness her commitment as the ‘wife of God’. With this she would renounce her former life, have her hair cut short and replace her regular clothes with a simple nun’s outfit. This black and white ‘habit’ was the same for all nuns, with little to arouse the senses. All were equal in the eyes of the Lord.

The life of the convent was stable and minutely regulated, and it remained largely unchanged for centuries. This way the nuns did not constantly have to make decisions, adapt to new situations and people, or be ‘ready for change’. Like modern-day guests at the retreat, the nuns lived a quiet, cyclical communal life with little contact with the outside world.

During the Reformation, in the 1500s, Protestants in Northern Europe spread rumours of impiety and debauchery in the Catholic monasteries and convents of Southern Europe. These rumours soon reached the Catholic Church, thanks to a new technology – printing, invented in the mid-1400s – which enabled rapid communication over much greater distances than before.

The Catholic Church reacted in 1545 by introducing ‘enclosure’, a type of enforced isolation that was also

applied at San Cataldo, preventing the nuns from leaving their convent or receiving any visitors. Under the Rule of Saint Benedict they had already given up owning any personal belongings, and the Rule's directives also included certain times for silence and speech. Breaches were punished, and offenders might be ordered to lie outstretched on a cold floor for hours.

This strict lifestyle was meant to enable the nuns, through contemplation, immersion and prayer, that is, to turn their full attention to God. 'Contemplation' is still a key word at San Cataldo, but now the old convent enables musicians, artists and researchers like me to benefit, briefly, from these peaceful surroundings and turn our full attention to our work.



## **BALUBA AND TAKETE**

Take a good look at the word 'calm' and think about how it is pronounced. Let it fill your mind. Doesn't it almost seem to instil what it denotes? Now say it out loud. The initial 'k' is admittedly an abrupt start, but it only involves the back of the tongue and the soft palate, leaving the open lips still. It moves into a neutral 'ah', like a tiny sigh, with the silent 'l' barely hinted before the lips close into an 'm' that turns the oral cavity into a resonating space. Now write the word in small letters. Especially in cursive handwriting, it has a smooth feel to it. No 'i's to dot; no 't's to cross.

The English word 'calm' is almost as soothing as its Danish counterpart – *ro* – which rolls easily off my native tongue. Short and sweet, round and rounded, it begins at