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Lessons on sustainable living, with the green monks [and nuns] of Mucknell

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Sustainability is touted as the solution to the environmental crisis, but is the sustainability movement running out of steam and itself in crisis? Take for example [climate change](#). Back in the summer of 2009, a global poll found that most people, including 77% of Britons, wanted their governments to do more about climate change. But in August, another global poll found that in the biggest most-polluting economies, concern about climate change had fallen sharply in the last two years. Minds and hearts have not yet been won. International climate talks are at an impasse and, unsurprisingly, carbon emissions are still increasing.

Perhaps those in the sustainability movement has focused too much on publicising their protests and pledges, but digging deeper, I find they are also providing constructive policy input and concrete results. [38 Degrees did not just co-ordinate the successful campaign](#) to prevent the sell-off of the national forests, but continues to co-ordinate and provide advice to the government. One year on from the buzz and the pledges to reduce carbon by 10% in 2010, the [10:10 campaign](#) is able to report actual reductions in emissions. And there are many relatively hidden positive things happening among the grass roots; I recently spent a happy hour or two with friends discussing sustainable initiatives in Devon, often linked with the [transition movement](#).

This more self-effacing commitment to sustainability reflects many people's willingness to imagine a better future and the effective first steps they have taken to realising it. In the media we read about the actions of MPs, bankers, journalists, prime ministers and police. There are acres of newsprint and online content about the possible underlying causes of the looting, and hand-wringing about our broken society, our self-centredness and cynicism. But across the country there are hidden millions of people who don't necessarily rationalise the sociological causes and effects, or whether they are motivated by idealism, but just roll up their sleeves and get on with it because they want to make their community a better place (think [@riotcleanup](#)).

For the past year, I have been living alongside the monks and nuns of Mucknell Abbey, a contemplative Benedictine community in the Church of England. There are few more hidden lifestyles, but they have precious insights to offer the instinctive idealist.

Benedictines follow the rule of life written by [St Benedict in the 6th century](#). Their vows are to stability, conversion of life and obedience. Stability is usually interpreted as commitment to the place and to each other. Conversion of life incorporates poverty and celibacy, but is more broadly understood as orientation to God. Obedience – the willingness to put aside one's own concerns and abandon one's own will, cheerfully and ungrudgingly, in order to follow the order of another – is, for me at least, the hardest of the vows to grasp. So I suspect that it is most worth the effort to grasp and is the most relevant to today's world. It comes from the Latin for "listen intently".

The onus is on both parties to listen to each other and to God, and to understand what is being asked. In fact, the Rule of Benedict opens with the word "listen". This is the word to which the community at Mucknell continually returns. Listen and pay attention, to God and God's word, to our weaknesses and how they drive us, to other members of the community, to our neighbours near and far, to the place where we live, to the whole planet. Understand the effects our attitudes and actions could have on others.

Benedict was extremely practical in his ordering of the life. He recognised the value of balancing prayer, manual work and study within the daily rhythm. Before I came alongside the community, I worked in analysis and consultancy; I was embedded in theory. At Mucknell, I have been living with the day-to-day practicalities of renewable energy and rainwater harvesting, getting my hands dirty in the kitchen garden and learning about the diversity of nature in the grounds. As a result, I am more connected with my food and shelter and my environment.

Community life can be idealised by newcomers, but they are rapidly disabused. Nuns and monks are real people, who live together at close quarters and who quickly get to know each other's idiosyncrasies. Benedict was well aware of our individual weaknesses, and permeated his rule with moderation. So this dewy-eyed idealism needs to give way to a healthy idealism both rooted in the present reality and oriented in hope to values such as hospitality, compassion and generosity to others; growth into the image of God; and sustainability, both physical and spiritual. The Benedictine order has flourished for nearly 1,500 years, and should be a sustaining presence for years to come.