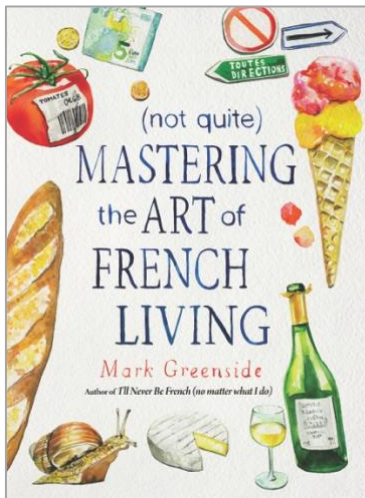


*Volume 4, Number 2, October 2020*



Dear Friend,

Donna and I just lost our second planned trip to France this year. The first was in May. We postponed it to September, then in July Air France canceled our flight to Paris. Now, instead of spending time enjoying friends and life in Brittany, I'm spending it fighting Air France for refunds. When I postponed our May-June-July flights (San Francisco-Paris-Madrid-Barcelona-Paris-Brest-Paris-New York-San Francisco) to September-October, I had to pay additional fees. In generosity and understanding of the pandemic, Air France dropped all of their change fees; then, to make up for the loss, they raised their ticket prices—so the same flights and destinations cost \$1500 more. Now, I'm seeking refunds on all of it (flights, baggage, seats, maybe bathroom use, who knows?). So far it's 16 (for me)—0 (Air France)—3 (pending). I wish the Giants did as well.

For a writer—at least this writer—it's hard to be light-hearted when the heart and the rest of the body are heavy. Some people get bigger in times of crisis. Some get smaller. I'm getting wider. Below is a piece I've been working on that links Brittany and my current mood. Beware, it's not what you expect: welcome to the bleak side of Greenside.

**La Martyre**

Gloom. Yes, even in France, Brittany, Finistère, Plobien. Sometimes the weather brings it on—a week or two or three of rain. Sometimes the news: famine, murder, genocide, plague; xenophobia, racism, sexism, nationalism, any ism. Often it's personal: Donna or friends absence. Most often, though, it's earthly malaise—I'm here, and someday sooner than I want, I won't be—and when that feeling/worry/concern becomes sentient and couples with bad writing or no writing, I'm glomed. Gloomed. Possessed by bleakness. It doesn't happen often, but often enough that I have strategies....

Sometimes—if the melancholia is weather inspired (it rains 270 days a year here)—I put on my jammies, get in bed, and read something funny: a chapter from *Catch-22*, *The Confederacy of Dunces*, *Pantagruel*, or *Candide*, for example, or watch anything Lubitsch or Marx Brothers. Other times, I go to museums in Quimper, Brest, Pont-Aven, Morlaix, or Landerneau and seek solace and inspiration in art. If it's sunny—as gloom is weatherproof—I go to the sea or walk in the countryside and hope for enervation and uplift from nature. And if the gloom is really deep and persists—like I've lost all purpose and hope—I go to Daoulas Abbey, the cathedral in Quimper or Pleyben, or one of those magnificently restored Breton chapels.

Over the years, I've visited many such chapels—Rumingol, Sizun, La Roche Maurice, St.-Hebot, Guimiliau, St.-Thégonnec. They were in competition with each other when they were built in the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries—tallest steeple, finest organ, greatest Calvary, sacrest relics—and they're in competition with each other today: hottest heaters (for thin-blooded congregants); biggest pews (for longer legs, weaker backs, and wider butts); softest, pliable floor coverings (for aging knees); brightest lights (for cataractic eyes); loudest sound system (for hard of hearing); and colorful pamphlets explaining the church's history in as many languages as possible—French, English, Italian, German, Spanish, and Japanese. These chapels are as much museums and cultural heritage sites as they are working churches. When I enter, I think, 'My God, look what human beings can do'. I go to them because they are light-filled, looking up, and uplifting—and nothing like La Martyre.

La Martyre is squat, thick, dark, and heavy, weighted and folding in on itself—a house of horrors and sorrows. Forget the Passion, Redemption, Ecstasy, Rapture, and Eternal Life. La Martyre is about Death, Misery, Pain, and Suffering: the horrible things that happened to the saints to make them saints; the horrible things that happened to Jesus; and in case I forget (which I rarely do), the horrible things that will happen to me.

I go to La Martyre when the world is going to Hell-in-a-handbasket and I'm at my existential worst, feeling beyond repair, fearful that I am what I do, and nothing that I do or have done really matters. I go to La Martyre and feel worse—which after a while makes me feel better, because it's a spur, like failure, telling me time—*my time*—is running out, and I'd better get going and do something, and sometimes afterward I do.

I drive into the village, and it's dead. The bar is closed. The hotel. *Epicerie*. Tourist Information. I park in front of the three-arched, twenty-foot high, two-foot thick granite wall that looks less like a triumphal arch and more like a barrier, separating the *enclose*—the church, cemetery, and ossuary—from life and the living. Everything looks as it did the last time I was here years ago, only worse: more erosion, grime, cracks, stains, mold, breakage, loss, which I find comforting. It is, after all, why I'm here: to sink so I can rise.

I get out of the car and look up. Still there, above the wall, greeting the village and me, is the most basic of Calvaries—a smaller-than-life-size Jesus and the two thieves being crucified. Jesus is in the middle, bigger and higher than the other two, and looks sad—I know how he feels—one of a long line of Jewish boys who became a martyr trying to please His mom and dad. The guys next to him look worse. Except for different knees bent, the one to His left, the bad guy, looks just like the guy on His right, the good guy. It's hard to tell who won and who lost. Jesus Himself looks spacey, gazing down at a tiny pieta on the arch below Him—at His dead self in His mother's lap—as if thinking, 'What am I doing here, and how long will this last?' Two questions I ask myself more and more.

I step up the three steps and over the two-foot high slab of granite placed across the top step to block Death's entry, which is odd, because as far as I can see Death is already in. The courtyard itself is a cemetery.

I walk around several young tombstones and stop in front of the chapel. The main portal leans to the right, looking like the entry to a cartoon haunted house—except this house isn't funny. Arched around the doorway is what once was a halo of granite bishops, saints, apostles, and angels, and now—I count them—are sixteen vacant pedestals and more than a dozen worn, stained, cracked, and ravaged heads, faces, and torsos. It's a deconstruction site if I ever saw one. There ought to be an 'Enter at your own risk' warning, or something that says, 'Hard hats won't help!' 'Damned if you do, damned if you don't.' There's been zero attempt to clean, restore, or enlighten anything. Basically, life happens, and this is all you need: a chapel, an ossuary, and a cemetery.

I enter the porch and am greeted by Ankou: an eighteen-inch statue of a merciless, wrathful skeleton holding a child's severed head under his arm like it's a gift he's been saving for me. *Bienvenue*. Welcome! Makes a fellow feel right at home—which to them I guess it is, because this is where we're all going. If I have any doubts, there's a carved angel on the water basin with the Breton words (translated by *Lonely Planet*), "Thou shall remember my judgment—such will be thine—Today it is for me, tomorrow is for thee!" And if I still don't get it, another statement cuts to the chase: "I kill you all." That's the entrance, and still I enter. It's been that kind of week.

I step into the darkness, waiting for my eyes to adjust, but even in the twilight I see Him. Hanging from the crossbeam in the middle of the church, looking down, attending and ministering His flock, is a wounded and bleeding larger-than-life-size Jesus. I follow His gaze to a tiny wooden skull and bones ten inches below his nailed feet. He's staring at Death, not victorious or confident or gloating, just looking, taking it in, and wondering like the rest of us, 'How did this happen to me?'

I walk into the nave, set with its *de rigueur* uncomfortable wooden chairs with their high straight backs and impossibly short legs and narrow, narrow seats, too narrow

for even a bony ass—and these people aren't built like that. There's not a pillow or cushion in sight. Or source of heat. Or kneeling bar to keep you off the hard, cold floor. It's the kind of place that lets you know you don't matter, you're nothing, temporary, and shouldn't expect too much, because this is the way it is and all you're going to get.

The windows and altars tell the story: temptation and punishment, greed and punishment, selfishness and punishment, doing good and punishment; betrayal, capture, misery, pain, agony, judgment, and death. And if I still haven't gotten the point, there's the ossuary next door, the cemetery surrounding the chapel, and the ubiquitous memorial listing the names of the dead from World Wars I and II to remind me the line between here and there is short and straight and connected.

The ceiling is blank, unpainted and unvarnished wooden slats—no stars, moon, sky, angels, or heavenly peace. The string and hammer beams are carved with pastoral scenes, scenes from the life of Jesus, and cornucopian abundance, each overseen and overshadowed by a beastie, monster, or viper. This is the chapel of a scared and superstitious people, people close to nature and afraid of nature, praying to a God of vengeance, no forgiveness and no mistakes. God of I'm gonna get you, no place to go and no place to hide, but Him and Jesus.

As I leave, I pick up a brochure (French only) and I'm astounded to read the name of the chapel is not La Martyre, as I thought, but Saint Salomon. Can this be? Can the scariest Breton chapel be named after a King of the Jews? No, I read. It's named after the Breton king who was killed—martyred—in this chapel and became a saint who was named after a King of the Jews. I find this comforting. Either Bretons are Jews of the heart, or Jews are Bretons of the heart—outsiders and victims, always expecting the worst and often getting it. And why not? Before all and after all, Jesus was a Jew.

I walk through the cemetery surrounding the church, noting the ages on the tombstones and that most of them are younger than me, and stop in front of the ossuary to regard the carved head and torso of a triumphant-looking man holding a human skull in one hand and what looks like a femur in the other. Beneath him two angels hold

banners written in Breton. One proclaims, “Death, judgment, freezing hell. Think on that and fear it;” the other, “Foolish is he who does not know he must die.” Talk about truth in advertising!

On the drive home, I think about life in the U.S. and how we’re bombarded by death—death by virus, mayhem, bacteria, poverty, bridges collapsing, cars colliding, forest fires, gas mains bursting, drought, earthquakes, hurricanes, guns, drugs, suicide, smoking. Every day on TV, the radio, internet, the press, Death arrives in a million different ways, and every time it’s new, a surprise, an outlier, unexpected, undeserved, alien, and always, always too soon. In France, Death is on your plate and next door. A fish on your plate looks like a fish, with its head, tail, and eyes; a bunny is a bunny, you can see it as you eat it; a chicken has feet and a neck when you buy it. Whole pigs—from butt to snout—roast on spits. Kids have pets—bunnies, chickies, goats, sheep, *horses* that suddenly disappear. Abattoirs advertise. People die in their beds in their homes—and they’re buried in their village cemeteries, which are in the middle of town, next to the church—unlike the U.S., where cemeteries are often removed, hidden, farmed out, *impersonal*—cities of the dead in the middle of nowhere. In Brittany, houses are built from the same stone as tombstones, and sometimes even with tombstones.

Clearly, these are a people accustomed to Death. How could it be otherwise? They’re Catholics, farmers, and fishermen: death, death, and death, not to mention all those war memorials in every village and two thousand years of being invaded—by Vikings, Celts, Carthaginians, Franks, Romans, including Julius Caesar himself, and in every century between the eleventh and twentieth by the Anglo-Saxon Brits. The reminders are everywhere: Roman ruins, medieval fortresses, Louis XIV Vauban forts, Napoleon’s prisons, Nazi bunkers. Even now, nuclear submarines and the French navy are based in Brest and Lorient. This little piece of coastline controls the North Atlantic and the North Sea and over time everyone has wanted it. Otherwise, it’s peaceful.

It’s part of the contradiction and absurdity of everyday life. Long, sandy beaches, warm, inviting, emerald green seas, heather in the hills and on the cliffs, rainbows and sand dunes, huge blue skies with cotton candy clouds, all punctuated with indestructible cement bunkers complete with underground tunnels and gun turrets. You cannot go

anywhere and not be struck by the beauty—sky, land, light, flowers—and the smell of death: pigs, chickens, German bunkers, war; the starkness of the stone houses softened by geraniums and hydrangeas surrounding them.

When Monsieur P went to the hospital for his annual tests, I'd ask, "When is he going to return?" Madame would shrug, "Never. Who knows? It's out of our hands. Expect the worst," and Monsieur would say, "Tuesday." That's the range: from the apocalyptic to the ordinary. Back and forth, forth and back, a dichotomy and motion I'm used to, but there's something about this place—La Martyre, Brittany, France—that makes time seem longer and shorter, like the slowness at the start of a journey and the speed at which we go home.



### **NEWS ABOUT *(not quite) Mastering the Art of French Living***

- For several days in July, the book was the **Kindle # 1 Seller** in three categories:
  - **French Cooking**
  - **Cookbooks, Food & Wine**
  - **French Travel**
- On August 13, I was invited to a Zoomed Alliance Française meeting in Milwaukee to discuss *(not quite) Mastering* and *I'll Never Be French*.  
Click [here](#) for the Zoom link and enter the password (which is case sensitive):

mgkA7?Ly

- The world-famous bookstore, Politics and Prose, in Washington, D.C. is offering an online class titled *Literary Journey Into the Heart of France* taught by Janet Hulstrand, author of *Demystifying the French: How to Love Them, and Make Them Love You*. She's using four books in the class, including *I'll Never Be French* and Harriet Welty Rochefort's fascinating new novel, *Final Transgressions*. Click [here](#) for more info.
- The book will come out in paperback in spring 2021, when, hopefully, we can safely travel again and the EU lets Americans enter.

If you haven't reviewed my books yet, please consider doing so. If you'd like to contact me, I can be reached at:

- Email: [mark@markgreenside.com](mailto:mark@markgreenside.com)
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Thank you.

Yours Sincerely,

Mark

