

The Discipline of Spiritual Retreat

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Retreat for most ministers involves a few days of gathering with colleagues in a resort setting for teaching, reflection, and recreation. Sometimes these are times of great renewal and restoration. At other times, if ministers are honest, they return home wearier than when they left. During my years in ministry, I have experienced many wonderful retreats and a few that did, in fact, leave me exhausted. Packing, traveling, too many meetings, jammed-packed schedules, and the lack of sleep sometimes take the joy out of a retreat.

Perchance it is not the retreat itself that robs our joy. Maybe our joy escapes long before the retreat. Perhaps we need more than well-organized events to maintain spiritual health. For years I have heard about individuals who practice the discipline of taking regular personal spiritual retreats. I suppose I felt that I lacked time, finances, or even the desire to pack up and search for spiritual renewal.

Recently, I took the advice of my spiritual mentors and headed for the hills of Ava, Missouri. The Ava abbey, like all of the seventeen Trappist monasteries in the United States, continues to honor the order's tradition of contemplation and study, common worship, and daily work to sustain the community. The *Rule of Saint Benedict*, written by Saint Benedict in the sixth century, guides every aspect of spiritual and practical life at the Assumption Abbey.

Initial Impressions

As a first-time retreatant, my heart and spirit responded to the numerous rituals of daily life at a Trappist monastery. Breathtaking fall foliage surrounded me as the paved road disappeared, and I slowly approached the rustic grounds of the monastery. The unassuming guest house and its quiet ambience overwhelmed me. My first feeling—a deep sense of peace—almost, but not quite, produced tears. How fortunate that my arrival coincided with mid-day prayer. I slipped into the little chapel—a simple austere structure, where the resident monks chanted the Psalms, recited prayers, and read from the Gospels. Anxiety ceased. My spiritual retreat began.

Before lunch, I unpacked my few items in the comfortable guest room—complete with a single bed, desk, and well-worn recliner. The faint smell of Pine-Sol permeated the air, creating a sense of hospitality and cleanliness. The room had no television, and I noted that my cell phone had only one bar of coverage.

Down the hallway, other guests and retreatants gathered around the long lunch room table. Although cordial in their personal introductions, they refrained from excessive conversation. Immediately I sensed that I shared the table with ordinary folks who, like me, were in search of solitude and quiet.

Prayerful Pilgrims

Although conversations were minimal, meal times did present opportunities for interaction with the other guests. During my three-day retreat, I learned a little personal background about each of my fellow retreatants. Mona has been coming to the monastery for sixteen years. She comes alone and usually spends a week. She works as a drug and alcohol abuse counselor in St. Louis, Missouri. When I asked what draws her back each year, she quickly said, “The peacefulness.” She explained that she arrives with few expectations. Some years she sleeps a lot. At other times she has journaled, read, or walked. She pointed out that the most difficult challenge was going back to her world and continuing to cultivate a peaceful disposition while working in an extremely stressful environment.

Pat serves as a Methodist minister and was on his second visit to Ava. He explained that during his first visit he arrived in a state of burnout. Conflict within his congregation had left him depleted of both energy and joy. His retreat at the monastery helped him gain perspective at a critical time in his ministry. This time, he is serving a different church where, he claims, there are fewer stressful events. He simply came to recharge his batteries and to prepare to serve his parish more effectively.

Tammy works as an oncology nurse. Like me, she was on her first visit to the abbey. As a single mom, grandmother, and people-loving caregiver, she finds little time for herself. She brought craft projects, books, knitting, and note cards with her and planned to stay for ten days.

In future retreats, I will focus on more silence and solitude. I discovered that silence provided deep healing. A couple of

times during my retreat I felt as though I was being robbed of this precious commodity. Once when I was talking with Mona at lunch, she began to tell me about her stressful life. I love to listen, and always enjoy hearing the personal journeys of others. However, after just a few minutes into her story, I recognized that I had shifted back to my work mode. I continued to listen politely, and then as soon as I could, I excused myself and went back to my quiet retreat.

Another morning, after early prayer in the chapel, I sat meditating in the guest living area with a cup of coffee. Pat came in and started talking about his church, his wife, who suffers with fibromyalgia, and his new empty-nest syndrome. Once again, I was aware that my soul needed time alone for complete rest and recuperation.

On-site Observations

Sixty miles from home, I discovered a culture extremely foreign from my own. Simplicity reigned. The beautiful pine trees mixed with the changing colors of fall provided a perfect retreat atmosphere. I crunched through dry leaves and took deep breaths of clean air on the mile hike that led to the Bryant River. My heart filled with gratitude as I gazed on exquisite pools of speckled trout. God’s creation had never appeared more spectacular.

Seven times a day the monks meet in the chapel for prayer and Scripture. They welcome retreatants from every faith group to join their worship. I felt uniquely comforted by this repetition of sitting and listening to the Word and prayers throughout the day. It reminded me, as it does the monks, of the importance of allowing the Word to invade our lives continually, rather than designating it to a daily devotional

experience. At each prayer time, a chime rang throughout the monastery. Except for the 3:15 a.m. chime, I responded to each invitation to gather for prayer and Scripture. This practice enabled me to continue in a spirit of praise, thanksgiving, and worship throughout the day, demonstrating the integration of prayer and Scripture into work, play, and rest.

Lingering Lessons

When I left the retreat, I took with me some homework assignments. My time away from ministry involvement had given me new perspective and clarity of vision. In the future:

- I will plan retreats two times a year—one in the spring and one in the fall.
- I will schedule a day off during the week, when possible, to compensate for the many evenings, weekends, and overseas ministry obligations that consume my time.
- I will take more quiet time to savor the Word and listen to God. My thirty minutes each morning paled in comparison to the monks who integrated prayer and Scripture into the daily fabric of their work, study, and rest.
- I will focus on replacing late evening television, phone conversations, and e-mail with an intentional time of contemplative prayer, soft music, and Scripture.
- I will strive to welcome guests into my home. At the monastery, I learned the value of unpretentious hospitality. When offered with Christian sincerity, it

provides solace and warmth to weary pilgrims. Simple meals, served with a loving heart, set the stage for community.

- I will remember that it is better to speak too little than too much.
- I will recognize the signs of soul fatigue. When I discover that I am no longer interested in listening to the stories of other pilgrims, I will slow down and rest.

Conclusion

Scripture underscores the need for times of solitude. When Elijah waited for the Lord to pass by on Mount Horeb, the Lord was not in the great wind, or the earthquake, or the fire, but “in the sound of sheer silence” (1 Kings 19:13, NRSV). And, Mark’s Gospel records that “very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed” (1:35).

Illustrations from Scripture teach the necessity of taking time away in solitude to hear the voice of God. The instances vary in length from a few moments to the forty days that Jesus spent in the desert. The commonality of these stories teaches the importance of scheduling time for God to speak and becoming quiet enough to hear His voice.

Regardless of where a retreat takes place—a week in a secluded mountain cabin or simply a long walk in the local park—creating space to hear God’s voice adds a rich and necessary dimension to the earthly journey.