

Can't Beat a Retreat

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08/28/05

Reading

Love...is the ground of all, and questions arise only insofar as we are divided, absent...alienated from that ground.

But the precise nature of our society is to bring about this division, this alienation...this absence. Hence, we live in a world which, though we clutter it with our possessions, our projects, our exploitations, and our machinery, we ourselves are absent...We are no longer capable of experiencing the truth that we are completely rooted and grounded in Love.

How can we rediscover this truth?

Only when we no longer need to seek it—for as long as we seek it we imply that we have lost it. But, in fact, to recognize ourselves as grounded in our true ground, love, is to recognize that we cannot be without it.

This recognition is impossible without a basic personal solitude...

One who is truly alone finds the heart of compassion within, with which to love not only this person or that person, but all people.

--Thomas Merton, from "Love and Solitude," as essay in *Love and Living*

I would like to begin by telling all of you who might feel in need of a retreat; who may be craving some quiet time in which to restore your soul and reacquaint yourself *with* yourself; who desire the healing and wholeness that sometimes it seems only solitude and silence can bring; to all of you, I just want to say:

Now is really not a good time. I mean, I know that that's important to our spiritual growth and everything, but there's so much to do right now...the church year is just getting rolling, after all; new members and friends are coming in the door; many members and friends will be returning from summer travels; there are classes beginning, for both children and adults; small groups are

forming; important ceremonies planned; committees are transitioning members and tasks; new teams are starting up; there is community work that calls to us; issues that need to be addressed; world events that we must speak out about and act upon... You know what I'm saying? So do you think you could schedule that renewal time a little later in the year, maybe? Or maybe next year, when we have all these things up and running? *Then* you can take a little break... *then* there will be time for silence...

And that's the way it goes, isn't it? We feel the need for retreat, renewal, restoration, and *as soon as we finish all these activities that call to us*, by God, we're going to have some quiet time. Because, well, silence is always there waiting for us, but the things we need to hear and say are pressing. There will always be time for stillness; right now we must *move* to accomplish the things we have set out for ourselves. We can always be alone; now is the time to join with others and *make things happen*.

But however long we put it off, however many excuses we make to avoid it, however many items on our to-do list take precedence over it, the need does not quite disappear, does it?

And even if it does not always present itself as a need, there is at least the recognition that somewhere, sometime, it will be important to our spirit, our consciousness, our sense of health and well-being, to *be* alone, quiet, apart from our activities, divorced for a while at least from the spiral of desire and quenching and struggle and failure and success and achievement and doing... just to *be* alone with ourselves, just to *be* alone reaching beyond ourselves even, those selves we are acquainted with in the everyday world, with others pleasing others around others... but to be alone, there's *something* there... to be alone, silencing maybe for a few moments the incessant chatter of our minds telling us who we are, just to *be* alone, just to *be*...

But, if we acknowledge the importance of making time for solitude; if we feel the need for retreat, renewal, and regeneration in our spiritual lives; if we suspect that silence is just as important as anything we may fill it with... why is it that, for so many of us, we never quite make the time? I'm not just pointing my finger now. This is a problem for me and, if I may tell on my colleagues, a real problem for ministers, who presumably should know better.

I remember one day in Theological School, toward the end of the semester, sitting around a table in the cafeteria with other students commiserating about all that we still needed to get done. Sermons to finish, reports on our internships, historical theology papers to write... one person slapped their forehead during this litany and exclaimed, "Ah, damn! I still have to finish that project on self-care!"

It took us a minute...but, finally, we all busted out laughing. Completely stressed-out about finishing a paper on self care?!?! And that sort of irony can easily carry over into ministry. I'm so busy reading and choosing meditations, preaching about the importance of contemplation, learning and teaching how various traditions practice prayer...and my own actual *experience* of retreat or renewal or revitalization of the spirit can easily be shuffled aside.

I'm going to be attending a District Ministers' Retreat in September, and it's not uncommon for ministers to show up there looking like harried executives—rather shabby, eccentric executives, I grant you, but with the same frantic expressions—tired, yet determined to press on; exhausted, yet stubbornly persistent in their activity. And again, sometimes, as we reach together toward self-awareness, as we remind each other that our congregations are fully capable of functioning wonderfully without our frantic activity, as we share a meal and trade stories of the mountains of tasks that we hope to accomplish, we laugh...realizing that *we* are the ones that preach the importance of solitude and silence and renewal and regeneration and *simply being*. And yet, oftentimes, and maybe not surprisingly, we don't seem to be able to practice what we preach.

But it truly makes me wonder: if ministers, who are supposed to be especially sensitive to this need...if *we* can't find time for it...if we set our priorities in such a way that quiet reflection, prayer, meditation, whatever you want to call that time of intentional solitude, if it falls to the bottom of our own important activities, we who claim this as central to our lives and, indeed, our responsibilities as religious leaders...well, as my son, Jack, would say: what's up with *that*?

I can only generalize, and I realize that all of us here represent many different points on the spectrum of how we practice solitude, but here's my attempt at answering, at least partially, what's up: I think, along with a desire for solitude, we also carry an intense fear of it. Silence and solitude, by definition, do not allow for distractions and, though our minds can buzz along for awhile cruising along the activities of yesterday and the plans for tomorrow, eventually, in intentional silence and solitude, we will come back to...ourselves. I return finally to me, and what then? What questions await me in the silence? What realizations? And what if, when all is said and done, when the distractions have subsided, when the questions are faced, when the realizations are assimilated and possible truths explored, and when even the magical workings of my own mind have quieted for a bit, what if, then, there is *nothing*? What if, at the heart of it all, at the center of all our activity, when we sweep away "our possessions, our projects, our exploitations, and our machinery," we have nothing to hold onto, no anchor, no direction, no clue? Do you dare to look that deeply? Do I?

This is where it strikes me that “retreat” is not a very apt term for what we’re speaking about. It is a brave act to make time to meet ourselves, questions and fears and secrets and insecurities all at once, to move boldly forward into the untamed land of silence. Sounds and activity are much more manageable than silence, much easier to bend to our will. It may just as easily be said that we “retreat” from the demands of silence into the world of talking and doing and acting.

There will be time enough for that, we tell ourselves...but beware, if we wait until we are *dragged* into that place of solitude, when we are *cast* by painful circumstances, by sickness, by heart-wrenching sorrow to face those questions that await us, when life *flings* us to the ground that we have been so wary of testing, we may enter this place of solitude so unprepared that we are dismayed by its strangeness, that we are frightened by its starkness, that we are strangers even to our very selves and that we can find no comfort even in that which sustains us. If we have not visited on our own and learned the landscape, finding oneself involuntarily stranded in the land of solitude in a vulnerable state may inspire despair borne out of *ignorance* of the terrain, doubt about our own abilities to traverse it.

So as I began to try and explore what this sort of intentional and courageous exploration of solitude might entail, I turned to someone whom I know was quite acquainted with silent contemplation: a Trappist Monk named Thomas Merton.

Now many of you know that Trappist monks go through long periods where they do not speak at all. That reminds me of a story that has absolutely nothing to do with Merton or Trappist monks, but it does begin in

a remote monastery deep in the woods where the monks followed a rigid vow of silence. This vow could only be broken once a year on Christmas, by one monk, and the monk could speak only one sentence.

One Christmas, Brother Thomas had his turn to speak and said, "I love the delightful mashed potatoes we have every year with the Christmas roast!" Then he sat down. Silence ensued for 365 days. The next Christmas, Brother Michael got his turn, and said, "I think the mashed potatoes are lumpy and I truly despise them!" Once again, silence ensued for 365 days.

The following Christmas, Brother Paul rose and said, "I am fed up with this constant bickering!"

So much for my humorous aside. But seriously, as we question the word “retreat,” we need to also question another common perception about solitary reflection: though this “retreat” into “solitude” sounds like we are cutting off ties to our fellow human beings, our Trappist friend

Thomas Merton (and mystics and contemplatives of nearly all of the major world religions) say that this is decidedly not the case. “If you seek escape for its own sake and run away from the world only because it is...intensely unpleasant, you will not find peace and you will not find solitude. If you seek solitude merely because it is what you prefer, you will never escape from

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the world and its selfishness...” writes Merton . Rather, he says, one enters Solitude, expecting, maybe, to find a room of one’s own, and instead, if one does not run away, if one does not move on in search of other distractions, finds that there is only One Solitude that we all share. There are no private property rights on this ground. To visit that land of Solitude is to connect ourselves to others in a way that cannot be reached by any other method.

And so the other excuse that we give ourselves, the altruistic justification that many of us (including ministers) use, that to spend time in solitude is somehow selfish and that we are willing to *sacrifice* that time so that we can be of service to others...well, it just wouldn’t wash with Merton. Nor would it convince Taoist teacher, Chuang-Tzu, nor the Zen masters and Sufi mystics and contemplatives of all stripes...Merton, the Catholic, agrees with all of them that our true service to others and in the world *can only begin* in solitude, when we have moved away from the frantic floundering of action that stems from uneasiness, that is meant to cover up the fact that we have no peace within. We have no peace because we still live in fear of what we might find in the silence. We live in fear of what we might find in the silence, because we have no faith. We have no faith, because we believe that faith is something we must create, or find, or manufacture. The good news, according to Merton, is that we don’t have to create it, manufacture it, find it: “for as long as we seek it we imply that we have lost it. But, in fact, to recognize ourselves as grounded in our true ground, love, is to recognize that we cannot be without it.”

However, “[t]his recognition is impossible without a basic personal solitude...”

Someone told me recently, “I know I have faith, I just don’t know what it is that I have faith in.” I think that she meant that she had touched the ground, and though she couldn’t describe it, she had *experienced* it in the silence of her soul. And while our inability to articulate it may be frustrating at times, Merton would assure us that the silent recognition is more important. “If there is no silence beyond and within the many words of doctrine, there is no religion, only a religious ideology. For religion goes beyond words and actions, and attains to the ultimate truth only in silence and Love.”

I’ve heard a story of a minister teaching a seminary class and talking about the daily routine of

his ministry.

“I begin each day with two hours of prayer and meditation...”

Before he finished his thought, a hand shot up in the classroom. He called on the student, who asked, “That seems like a lot. What if you have a really busy schedule that day? Do you make allowances for that?”

“Ah, yes,” said the minister. “On those days, I spend *three* hours in prayer and meditation.”

So let me reconsider my opening statements. I would like to end now by telling all of you who might feel in need of a retreat; who may be craving some quiet time in which to restore your soul and reacquaint yourself *with* yourself; who desire the healing and wholeness that sometimes it seems only solitude and silence can bring; to all of you, I just want to say:

There’s so much to do right now...the church year is just getting rolling, after all; new members and friends are coming in the door; many members and friends will be returning from summer travels; there are classes beginning, for both children and adults; small groups are forming; important ceremonies planned; committees are transitioning members and tasks; new teams are starting up; there is community work that calls to us; issues that need to be addressed; world events that we must speak out about and act upon...

Now is the perfect time for you to make space for silent meditation in your lives. Now is the perfect time to acquaint or reacquaint yourself with solitude. Now is the perfect time to nurture yourself, to bravely retreat, to selflessly seek renewal, to reach out compassionately to others by reaching intentionally within...

Let me now invite you all into a place of shared silence following these words by Nancy Wood [2]

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It is our quiet time.

We do not speak, because the voices are within us.

It is our quiet time.

We do not walk, because the earth is all within us.

It is our quiet time.

We do not dance, because the music has lifted us to a place where the spirit is.

It is our quiet time.
We rest with all of nature.

[1]

Merton, Thomas, "Solitude," *Seeds of Contemplation*, pgs. 54-55.

[2]

#481, *Singing The Living Tradition*