

FINDING THE *Holy* *in the* ORDINARY

Being the mother of three children under six years old was a challenge and a joy for me. But at one point, I went through a time of simply feeling as if I had lost something that I couldn't quite name and that I didn't quite know how to recover. My children were healthy and happy, for the most part, and I enjoyed my church community and participating in pastoral duties with my husband, as I was able, given my family responsibilities. Still I longed for more—more time for myself, more time for God.

HELEN CEPERO

When I spoke to my husband, he suggested that perhaps what was missing was something like a Sabbath time. After all, church responsibilities on Sunday left little time for relaxation, let alone genuine rest. Perhaps, he suggested, I might want to take one night a week for my own personal Sabbath. So began two years of weekly Sabbath. On Tuesday evenings, I would leave the house, the children, and the evening meal in my husband's care and I would eat dinner alone, exercise at the YMCA, and then spend an hour in a coffeehouse writing in my journal. When I came home at ten or ten-thirty I would be relaxed, glad to be home, and ready for the weekly responsibilities once more.

There was a sort of timelessness to those Tuesday evenings. I also found a sense of discovery, both pleasant and unpleasant, about myself and my life, and a real freedom to explore. After several months I realized that I had, with my husband's help, stumbled into something that I had never had on a regular basis. I had found the gift of solitude. And in finding the gift of solitude, I not only recovered a part of myself that I had misplaced in the busyness of childcare and church responsibilities, I

found as well, especially in my journaling, a renewed sense of God's presence with me. I had found that I was not alone in my aloneness.

"Or what woman having ten silver coins," says Jesus, "if she loses one of them does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost' " (Luke 15:8-9, NIV).

Solitude, unlike loneliness, is not so much about grieving for what is lost, as it is about finding what is lost and celebrating a newfound sense of wholeness. And solitude for the Christian is not so much about being alone with the Alone, as it is being able to see one's life and all of its relational complexity in the context of one's relationship with God. Solitude helps us to see what really matters to us. In solitude we find the space and the freedom to be surprised again by the holy in our ordinary lives—hearing the sound of the birds in their morning chorus, tasting the comfort of good food, feeling the love of a remembered friend, seeing the startling color of a rose. It is time to simply "be."



IN SOLITUDE WE FIND THE SPACE AND THE
FREEDOM TO BE SURPRISED AGAIN BY THE HOLY
IN OUR ORDINARY LIVES ...

*“Begin here. It is raining. I look on the maple, where a few leaves have turned yellow, and listen to Punch, the parrot talking to himself and to the rain ticking gently against the windows. I am here alone for the first time in weeks, to take up my ‘real’ life again at last. That is what is strange—that friends, even passionate love, are not my real life unless there is time alone in which to explore and to discover what is happening or has happened. Without interruptions, nourishing and maddening, this life would become arid. Yet I taste it fully only when I am alone here and the house and I resume old conversations” (May Sarton, *Journal of a Solitude*).*

Paradoxically, solitude is less about getting away from it all and much more about coming home. Coming home to ourselves and our lives is not always easy, but more difficult still is the feeling of alienation and exile we can sometimes feel from the very stuff of our lives—our roles, our work, our relationships. With permanent presence, sometimes the distance needed

for prayerful reflection is lost. With permanent absence from the stuff of our lives, there is little left to reflect on. So solitude itself is linked to the back and forth movement of presence and absence in our lives.

Despite my constant assurances about the benefits of solitude, I find myself reluctant to set aside time for it. I protest that I am much too busy, and the demands of family, church, and community are too pressing. But, perhaps underneath all of this is almost an addiction to doing useful activity that makes solitude seem like just a waste of time.

It seems that if activity is not clearly, concretely useful it is seen as worthless, or meaningless, or even slightly immoral. We often feel guilty if we have nothing to do, and feel a little lost without a task to complete. We greet each other by asking the question, “What do you do?” We justify taking a vacation because it will help us to work better when we get back. We are

reluctant to admit that we take time off to do nothing, and feel guilty when we relax too early in the day. Sometimes we fear being misunderstood as self-centered when we really long for more of God and a deeper understanding of ourselves in the world.

Solitude is not a race against time, or about managing our time more efficiently. Solitude is found time—time to be with our experience of ourselves, our experience of others, our experience of the creation, and our experience of God in and through all the areas of our lives. It is about gloriously un-hurried time that is rooted in the present moment, not in what we’ve accomplished in the past or hope to achieve in the future. One friend of mind always begins her retreat time with a leisurely bubble bath; another begins by taking an afternoon nap; I often begin with a long, contemplative

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RECOMMENDED READING

A Place for God: A Guide to Spiritual Retreats and Retreat Centers

Timothy Jones

This book lists Christian retreat centers, and has a section on preparing for a retreat. I also love that the Jones book does something few others do—it tells whether the retreat center is handicap accessible and if spiritual direction is available.

The Recollected Heart

Philip Zaleski

Zaleski has some good ideas for making a personal retreat that incorporate scripture in the Benedictine tradition. He is not evangelical, but I (and others) have found it helpful in finding an order for times of daily prayer while on retreat.

A Guide to Retreat for All God’s Shepherd’s

Rueben P. Job

While aimed at ministers, the material seems helpful for anyone who needs to get away and ponder vocational questions and concerns about the tension between doing and being in our lives.

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walk where I take time to see what is along the path, as much as I am able.

While solitude of a few moments or hours can be woven into the fabric of our lives, it is often helpful to get away to find solitude. Retreat centers offer an opportunity to be in space that has usually been carefully prepared to enhance an experience of solitude. There is no radio to report on traffic conditions or give a weather report; there is no television drama to provide another plot if our own life feels a bit lacking; there is no cell phone to bring us urgent messages, or computers to check our email. But there are usually paths to follow, comfortable spaces to sit and rest, and blessed silence. There may also be someone who could talk with you about your journey or a book or article that provides just the right amount of companionship for your retreat.

Retreat houses are usually not difficult to find and are often listed in the local telephone directories. Generally these places of retreat understand hospitality to be at the center of their ministry, and offer a warm welcome at a reasonable cost. Often, if they are un-able to accommodate you for some reason, they are able to direct you to another house. Your pastor might also be a resource in locating a nearby retreat house environment that supports the practice of solitude and silence.

I am no longer the mother of three children under six years old; now I am the mother of three teenaged children. And I still long with a similar and perhaps even a greater intensity for times of solitude. Times when I can sit apart and rest for a few moments or hours or days, times to discover again myself and my God and be surprised once more. Without these times of solitude I can feel scattered and lost and even lonely in spite of being surrounded by family and friends. But in a time of solitude I can find again my center and let God gather my scattered pieces into the woman the Creator fashioned me to be. □