



Raven's Bread

Food for Those in Solitude

Vol: 9 No: 4 November 2005

Raven's Bread is a quarterly newsletter (FEB-MAY-AUG-NOV) for hermits and those interested in the eremitical life published by Paul and Karen Fredette. The newsletter seeks to affirm and support this way of life. ***Raven's Bread*** is a collaborative effort and thus depends on the shared reflections, stories, news, notices, letters, and information from hermits themselves.

The ***Raven's Bread*** Web Site offers an **ABBREVIATED** version of our full printed newsletter, which also includes a **Bulletin Board**, a **Reader Forum** featuring responses to a quarterly discussion topic, and a **Letters** section from the readership.

Please send your written contributions, as well as address changes and subscriptions to:

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Raven's Bread (formerly ***Marabou***) derives its name from the experience of Elijah, the prophet, in 1 Kgs. 17: 1-6. A raven, sent by God, nourished him during his months of solitude at the Wadi Cherith (the Cutting Place).

zzzzzz Thoughts On Solitude zzzzzz

Excerpted from "The Mantarm handbook"
by Eknath Easwaran
founder of the Blue Mountain Center of meditation
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P.O. Box 256, Tomales, CA 94791
www.easwaran.org

All the mystics tell us to live each moment as if it were our last, and the man or woman who repeats the Mantram regularly and with real devotion is actually preparing for this. The person who has become established in the mantram, who has made the mantram an integral part of his or her consciousness, is prepared for death at all times. Mahatma Gandhi, explaining this state, said once that it would be easier for his life to stop than for his mantram *Rama* to cease reverberating in his consciousness. And this is indeed how it came to pass: when his body was pierced by the assassin's bullets, Gandhi blessed his attacker with folded hands and fell with *Rama* on his lips and in his heart.

If we are able to repeat the mantram at the moment of death, the great mystics tell us, we merge into God just as a bursting bubble becomes one with the sea. This is not just a Hindu idea; we find it in all the other great religions too. I remember a friend once confiding in me how comforting he found it as a child when one of his teachers, a very loving nun, told him that he would go straight to heaven if he were saying the Hail Mary at the moment he died...

This idea that the Mantram can be our salvation at the moment of death is not as simplistic as it may seem at first. It's not as if we can lead as selfish and sensate a life

as we please until the very last second and then say the Holy Name and attain salvation. It is not possible to say the mantram with all our heart at the moment of death unless we have been repeating it for a long time before. An English disciple once asked his spiritual teacher, Sri Ramana Maharshi, why he couldn't just throw himself under a train repeating the mantram and attain salvation without all those years of discipline. Sri Ramana Maharshi's penetrating answer was that his last thought would not be the mantram; it would be the "I" thought.

The process of death as described by the great mystics may throw some light on why this so. Dying, they tell us, is a more complicated process than we ordinarily think. It is not sudden; it is a gradual withdrawal of consciousness from the body into the Self. First consciousness is withdrawn from the senses to the mind. The senses are shut down, and the outer awareness of the body and of our surroundings is gone. We still have ears, but we hear nothing because consciousness has been withdrawn; we still have eyes, but there is nothing outside that we see. Yet even though we can no longer see or hear, there is still consciousness in the mind, with all its desires and regrets, all its conflicts and hopes and fears. As long as we have these selfish desires, conflicts and reservations, they will remain in the mind at a deep level, where all desires and conflicts merge in the "I" thought at the time of death.

This process is strikingly parallel to what happens in deep meditation. When we are concentrating deeply, we will not hear planes in the sky or the cars on the road, because we have withdrawn consciousness from the senses. The crucial difference is that in meditation this is a voluntary withdrawal, whereas in death it is involuntary. In meditation, however, we go even further: we deliberately seek to withdraw consciousness not only from the senses, but from the mind as well. This is what stilling the mind means.

To withdraw consciousness from the senses into the mind is not too hard, but it is very difficult to withdraw consciousness at will from the mind into the Self, into the core of purity and perfection which is at the very center of our being. Yet as long as the mind has not been stilled through the practice of meditation and the repetition of the mantram, consciousness will remain in the mind at the moment of death. We will still be identified with the ego, and our last thought will be *I, I, I*. To repeat the mantram at this stage is impossible if we have only been saying it on the surface level of consciousness, for there is no surface level any longer. To be able to repeat the mantram at the actual moment of death, the mantram must have sunk very, very deep into the mind – so deep that instead of our last thought being *I, I, I*, the last thought will be of God, whose symbol is the mantram.

This has a tremendous practical significance. If we have been living for ourselves, our last thought will be of ourselves, and there will be no way to avoid the suffering of ego-identification when the body is wrenched away. Abruptly, everything that we hold dear will be snatched away from us: our possessions, our cherished plans for the future, our loved ones, and even our body and the miscellaneous collection of likes and dislikes, habits and opinions that we are pleased to call our personality. Unless we have worked long and hard to cultivate detachment from all this – in other words, unless we have been trying to lead the spiritual life – the pain of this separation will be terrible. But if we have been repeating the mantram with sincerity and enthusiasm until it has become an integral part of our consciousness, even in life we can always be completely mindful of the deathless, changeless reality we call God. Then, when the body is shed, our individual consciousness will merge in the Lord, who is our real and deepest Self.

In other words, even in life, the person who has realized the indivisible unity of life has already died to all that was separate in him, all that was selfish in her, to come to life in the Lord. This is why St. Francis says, "It is in dying that we are born to eternal life." This death of the ego is the purpose of all the discipline of the spiritual life. Even in little things, whenever we are very patient or cheerfully do something we dislike, a little of our selfishness and self-will has died. Little by little we surrender everything – not under duress – but entirely by free choice, until we no longer need to hang on to anything outside us for support. Then, once we are established in this state of unity, we are established in it forever. This is what Jesus means when he offers us life everlasting: our constant awareness of the unity of life, our constant awareness of God, is not interrupted even when the physical body dies.

A Word from Still Wood

Imperceptibly it seemed, summer slid into fall this year. As the days shortened, we ourselves were brought up short. How could leaves that had just unfurled with the spring rains be raining down upon us already? To paraphrase the song, "Where has all the summer gone?" In truth, where had the whole year gone? You've noticed, no doubt, how time slips by faster as we, ah-hem, mature? Our perception of time is often more

subjective than we realize. Some things we are glad to have pass quickly, like say a ...root canal! On the other hand, who wants precious moments of shared joy or contentment to flit by barely savored? So we ask, what IS time? One of the best descriptions of time we ever heard is this: "Time is that which allows life to happen bit by bit and not all at once." It is also that which paces the changes in our lives and in the world around us. It allows us to be aware of both the beauty and the pain that each new experience brings. Although happy events pass more swiftly than we may like, we are gifted with the ability to remember and re-live them at a later date.

Memory also highlights the fact that nothing is ever quite the same. This year we are surprised to find the mountain slopes still green in mid-October. The no-show autumn color-show astonishes even the natives who claim they can't recall such a strange season. But really, have two autumns ever been the same? One autumn we anxiously sniffed the air as forest fires sprang up on tinder-dry slopes around us. Another fall the frost came early and hard, stripping the trees just as they began to glow with jewel-like hues. Flooding was the great hazard last year as three hurricanes in quick succession sent driving rains sluicing down ridges, creeks and rivers, washing away the wild asters almost before they bloomed. This year, the fields and hedges are colored with those fluffy lavender shrubs punctuated by goldenrod and crimson poison oak.

The changing seasons challenge us to accept the inner changes that we carry with us. As nature nudges us into the bare-bones month of November, our lives also course along with it. We enter a season dedicated to remembrance and thanksgiving. Last year, we could still send pictures of the colorful mountains to our dear Georgette. This year, we pack away our deck furniture and tamp down our gardens for their winter sleep, knowing that she is still with us, but in a new way. As we put up drapes to draw on chilly nights and unpack the comforter that MaBelle loves to curl up on, our sense of "home" is enhanced. Lights glowing in the early dusk suggest the warmth and safety that seem the essence of the eternal home where, we trust, the porch lights are always burning and all our loved ones await us.

We appreciate the tips for books recommended to **RB** readers - a great way to share! Would you, please, include as much information about the book as possible, i.e., publisher, price, length and where it can be purchased? This would help us since we cannot always track down the book ourselves. Thanks!

**With Grateful love,
Karen & Paul**

**What a lovely surprise to finally discover
how unlonely being alone can be.
Ellen Burstyn (*Broadway Actress*)**

Discussion Topics for February 2006 Issue:

What kind of music have you found contributes to your prayer and actually promotes your silence?

Deadline: January 1, 2006

**The very best and utmost of attainment in this life
is to remain still and let God act and speak in thee.
*Meister Eckhart (Medieval Mystic)***

zzz **ECO-HERMITS (conclusion)** zzz

By Janet Diehl

Vows involve a ritual expressing lifelong commitment. Although I have, and still do,

reflect upon the concept, I have not felt it necessary so far to take such a formal step. The traditional western vows of Poverty, Chastity, and Obedience interest me because they appear supportive of ecological responsibility. Yet they seem such negative and life-denying expressions to denote a choice of life-style which is privileged, joyful, and immensely satisfying. The celebration of natural abundance results in a kind of hedonistic frugality which needs little money to support it. This, for me, replaces the concept of poverty.

Chastity is often confused with celibacy, but is not at all the same thing. For me, although I choose to remain celibate, it means avoiding pollution of one's mind, body, and spirit, and of our Mother the Earth and of all the heavens. "We underestimate the damage done to the sky when we allow words to slip away into the clouds." (from *Hillside*, by Viggo Mortensen.)

Obedience is surely not blind submission to the will of another, but involves a commitment to personal integrity and self-discipline. This means an ongoing development of one's powers of discernment and the deepening of self-knowledge, for all of which, time spent alone is essential. It also demands that one be scrupulously, and therefore, painfully honest with oneself.

In 1989 I decided to move from the country and commit myself to living in public housing in an inner-city environment. I need to constantly re-affirm that commitment, because the noise, pollution, and worst of all, the spiritual poverty, of our cities increases daily. The majority of the world's people have no choice but to live in over-crowded cities, and cities have become the deserts of the soul. One is often, in fact, more alone in a city than in the countryside or the bush, and if one is sensitive, one suffers, and becomes extremely vulnerable. So, in my own small way, I aspire to live a life of the soul, in relatively uncongenial surroundings, joining with many others to restore the balance.

When I was allocated a tiny new house with an equally tiny garden, in a suburb close to the river, rich in trees and parklands, in what is among the most beautiful capital cities in the world, I did much soul-searching before accepting it. I regarded it, from the first, as a sacred trust and set about creating an earth sanctuary which now visibly affects the surrounding district, and whose energies I offer continually for the healing of the whole earth.

Contemplation is a country whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere. You do not find it by travelling but by standing still.

**Thomas Merton
(*Hermit Monk*)**

**Hermit Resources Available from *Raven's Bread*
November 2005**

(all prices include postage)

BIBLIOGRAPHIES

Annotated Readings in Spirituality - by Sharon Jeanne Smith **21pp. \$5.00**

Solitude & Union: A Select Bibliography on the Hermit Way of Life by Cecilia W. Wilms **26pp. \$5.00**

Annotated Books on Solitude - **4pp. \$2.00**

JURIDICAL COMMENTARIES

Commentary on Canon 603 from "The Law of Consecrated Life" by Jean Beyer SJ, 1988 Translated from the French by W. Becker, 1992 **10pp. \$2.50**

Hermits: The Juridical Implications of Canon 603 by Helen L. Macdonald, Researcher Novalis: St. Paul University, Ottawa, ONT **24pp. \$5.00**

Statutes for Hermits by The Bishops of France (1989)
12 pp. \$2.50

HERMIT RULES

Rules for Hermits (Spanish & English) by Padre Justo, O.P. **9pp. \$2.50**

Eremitic Rule of Life **30pp. \$5.00**

Franciscan Plan of Life in Hermitage **4pp. \$2.00**

Topical Outline for Plan of Eremitical Life **3pp. \$2.00**

HERMIT SURVEYS

Raven's Bread Survey 2001 - Compiled Responses **23pp. \$5.00**

Marabou Questionnaire 1996 - **9pp. \$2.50**

ARTICLES & COMMENTARIES

Notes to Guide the Beginning Hermit by A Hermit of Mercy **15pp. \$3.00**

Lay Hermits by Rev. Eugene Stockton **8pp. \$2.50**

NCR 2004 "Sacristans of Emptiness" by Rich Heffern **6pp. \$2.50**

Discernment Criteria - "Marabou" 1996 - **6pp. \$2.00**

Four Articles by Kenneth C. Russell. Reprinted by permission from "*Review for Religious*" (excellent footnotes & references)

Being a Hermit: Where and How 12 pp, \$6.00

Acedia - The Dark Side of Commitment 4 pp. \$2.00

The Dangers of Solitude 5 pp. \$2.50

Must Hermits Work? 10 pp. \$5.00

Where God Begins To Be A Woman's Journey into Solitude by Karen Karper

An Authors Guild Back imprint.com edition

To order online, click on this link: www.book.orders@iuniverse.com

Autographed copies (\$12.95 plus \$2.50 postage & handling) are available from:

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Fellowship of Solitaries

Comprised of and open to religious solitaries of all stripes. The Fellowship is ecumenical and has no official connections with any church. People may join the Fellowship either as Members or as Associates. All receive a regular Newsletter and a List of Members, so that they may be prayerfully aware of each other in their different paths and to make contact with each other if they so wish.

Correspondent: Eve Baker, Coed Glas, Talgarth Road, Bronllys, Brecon, Powys, LD3 0HN

To email Fellowship of Solitaries directly click on this link: solitaries@onetel.com

To access the website of Fellowship of Solitaries click on this link:

<http://www.solitaries.org.uk/>

Raven's Rest

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Retreatants Welcome. Now scheduling for April 2006 at **Raven's Rest** Hermitage (a fully furnished apartment with kitchenette & private entrance) here at **Still Wood**. Offers opportunity to experience solitude and silence on a forested mountainside of the Newfound Range in the rural Smokies, approximately 35 miles N.E. of the Great Smokies National Park and 35 miles N.W. of Asheville. Spiritual Direction available upon request. Suggested offering \$25.00 per day includes meals. For further information, contact:

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BOOK NOTICES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

THE MANTRAM HANDBOOK

by Eknath Easwaran.

The author was founder and director of the Blue Mountain Center for Meditation. He taught practical spiritual skills in the U.S. for more than thirty years, and has authored over two dozen books on the spiritual traditions of East and West. In this book, the author hands the reader an ancient tool, in the West called a prayer word or prayer of the Heart, and in the East a mantra or mantram.

1977. 223 pp. Softcover. \$13.95. Nilgiri Press, Box 256, Tomales, CA 94971.
web: www.nilgiri.org ISBN 1-915132-98-2.

THE HERMITAGE WITHIN: SPIRITUALITY OF THE DESERT by A Monk.

Translated by Alan Neame.

"Not everyone can or should live as a hermit. But no Christian can do without an inner hermitage where God can be encountered. The hermitage is a place apart, a desert place where a person comes face-to-face with his/her true self, and in that meeting discovers God. It is a place of silence, of fear and fascination, of anguish and grace."

1982. 152 pp. Softcover. Paulist Press, 545 Island Road, Ramsey, NJ 07446. ISBN: 0-8091-2428-9. (Loan copy available from RB Library).

SOLO: ON HER OWN ADVENTURE edited by Susan Fox Rogers.

A selection of twenty-two stories of/by women who undertake a variety of extraordinary journeys on their own. Along the way, they develop deeper relationships with themselves, make life decisions that are right for them, or escape restrictive societal norms, however unconventional they might be. They face Inspiring challenges and experience the exhilarating rewards of going it alone.

1996. Softcover. \$12.95. An Adventura Book from Seal Press, 3131 Western Ave., Suite 410, Seattle, WA 98121.

Email: sealpress@scn.org. ISBN: 1-878067-74-5. (used available at www.amazon.com)



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