



Raven's Bread

Food for Those in Solitude

Vol:2 No:1 February 1998

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Raven's Bread is a quarterly newsletter for hermits and those interested in the eremitical life. The newsletter affirms this life style as a valid means of living in deeper fidelity to God and in spiritual union with the whole human race. 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 page is an abbreviated version of our full newsletter, which also includes a bulletin board and reader forum.

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

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The annual subscription to the printed newsletter costs \$7.50. Any extra donations will be used to subsidize subscriptions for hermits who cannot afford the full cost.

To e-mail Karen directly click on this link: 103517.210@compuserve.com

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).

Thoughts in Solitude

"Over all being stands the words: Let there be! And there was, and there is. To be is to obey the commandment of creation. What endures as a response to a command." These words by Abraham Heschell have had a profound effect on me, revealing a truth within creation. God is. I am. The am-ness or the is-ness of me is what I gradually discovered to be true. By 1980 I had begun to describe my prayer life as: You are. I am. We be. These phrases were expressive and meaningful to me but difficult to explain to others.

The three words *"Let there be."* has evolved into a deeper awareness and understanding of what it is to come to birth and live in the Breath of God, the same Breath in which everything in the cosmos resides and breathes. When asked what is my method of prayer, the best I can do is to say breath-prayer --- just being in the Breath of God. No words. No concepts. No images. I prefer to become lost in God rather than say things to God. There is the unspoken desire of wanting God to be me and I to be God until we are two no more.

Eventually there came the awareness that living is breathing and breathing is praying till I feel that life, my life, is prayer. Because God's breath is within everyone and everything, I know myself to be somehow integrated and within a harmonious whole. I sense a harmony with myself, with others, with the cosmos, with God. I once found a card that defined and illustrated my prayer method. It said: *"To pray is to breathe. Do it deeply and you will be filled with life."*

Another important "word" has been *"Today if you hear his voice, harden not your heart."* This verse from Psalm 95 contains the significant word "if". It seems to suggest that while we listen daily to the voice calling out this charge, there may come that moment within a given day when to hear his voice is going to be critical and crucial - leading to conflict within the individual as suggested by *"harden not your heart."*

The conflict is between choosing growth into the unknown or staying in the present because it is known and therefore "safe." If what is heard is contrary to the ordinary scheme of things within one's life, it can be an experience of conflict. This was particularly true for me in hearing God's voice to enter religious life and some 25

simpler life more in tune with the rhythms of season and tide. For my first two years here in Colorado I worked under the tutelage of the hermit monk at the monastery in Snowmass, who taught me the craft as he'd learned it and, at his death in December 1995, handed the post on to me. "It's work," he used to say, "but somebody's got to do it."

Quite a few people - including my two adult daughters - have asked me whether this means I'm about to disappear to some remote mountaintop never to be seen again. "Can we still phone you, Mom?" I've tried to reassure them - and anyone else who asks - that I'll still be around. The romantic stereotype of total reclusion is no longer really practical in this day and age, given the reality of earning a living. I'll still be assisting with services at Christ Church, Aspen, offering period retreats and workshops on Contemplative Prayer and doing some spiritual direction.

The question is really one of priorities. In a hermit life, the primary obligation is to the "work" of silence and solitude. Earning a living, having fun, doing new things, are kept to the minimum necessary to sustain life. The hermit vocation is pointed toward emptiness and waiting. It is a pushing toward the edge, to discover in one's own life how much can be contained in how little.

Although a hermit might appear to be the ultimate solitary, the vocation is deeply communal and makes sense only in the context of the whole church. "Separated from all and united to all," as the old hermit saying goes.

The NT image of the vine and branches is the charter of the hermit life, and its lifeblood is intercessory prayer. In my daily life I try to take upon myself more intentionally the dimensions of solitude, silence, emptiness - and yes, loneliness - but always in communion with others who have taken on the dimensions of family, expansiveness, opportunity, responsibility and, yes, over-commitment and distraction. We help each other through prayer to accept and balance all these elements which no one life can fully embrace.

Rev. Cynthia Bourgeault

Episcopal Priest

Snowmass, CO

Perhaps, someday, solitude will come to be properly recognized and appreciated as the teacher of personality. The Orientals have long known this. The individual who has experienced solitude will not easily become a victim of mass suggestion.

Albert Einstein

Hermits · The Question of Labels

By

Rev. Richard Kropf, Hermit

These are not happy times for those who seek solitude. Described by nearby townsfolk as a "hermit", the accused "Unabomber", whether or not he turns out to be the calculating killer the FBI has sought for nearly twenty years, is a strange man by anyone's standards. A brilliant mathematician, who shied from ordinary human contact from his youth, this apparently twisted personality no doubt will be considered an archetypal example of all those who choose to live alone in a secluded place. Thus the term, "eremos" could, even if it shouldn't, be applied to any of three different types of loners.

The first are those who are more or less born solitaries or else those who have become, for one reason or another, social outcasts. Not all of them are necessarily misanthropes like the current unabomber suspect. Most persons of this type are simply harmless introverts who prefer to live among wild things more than they do among people. Even the more disagreeable among them sometimes do us a service, if only by remaining out of sight, thereby providing an interesting topic for gossip and speculation, without forcing themselves or their ideas on anyone else.

Secondly, there are those, many of whom are very gifted persons, who deliberately shut themselves off from human contact for long periods of time, to create some of humanity's greatest treasures. They live Thoreau-like, in the woods or as did Emily Dickinson, in the seclusion of a garret or hidden room. It could be their strongly extroverted genius (why else do they strive so hard to express themselves?) that drives them to solitude, for their very sociability proves their own worst enemy. One cannot help but think of Thomas Merton who was once accused of wanting to be a "hermit on Times Square." Whatever one may think of their inner contradictions, it is unlikely that any of these solitaries would have accomplished what they did in a crowd.

Finally, there is the third type of "hermit" - those who deliberately isolate themselves from normal human interaction in order to seek God. Despite the fame of Anthony of Egypt and the fabled "Desert Fathers" (and "Mothers") this is not a strictly Christian phenomenon. There were colonies of solitaries on Mt. Carmel in the time of Elijah the Prophet. There were groups of "therapeutae" in Egypt before the beginning of the Christian era, and even well after those times, there were neo-platonist philosophers who believed that the seeker of the ultimate truth must remain "alone with the Alone". This solitary religious quest was not seen as something exclusive or esoteric but rather as a necessary stage in everyone's life - at least for anyone who truly seeks God.

In India a fully rounded human life included not only the early stages of student and married "householder", but also the further stage of ascetic or "forest dweller". Once perfected, these fully matured hermits may even return to wander homeless through society as "enlightened ones. The same ideal is also found in Mahavana Buddhism where the "bodhisattva" postpones final or full enjoyment of Nirvana in order to spread enlightenment and compassion to the rest of the world.

Here is a paradox, one perhaps best expressed by M. K. Gandhi when he remarked that "he who would be friends with God must remain alone · or (else) make the whole world his friend." The answer to this riddle is found in Christianity where we have the explicit belief in a Communion of Saints. In the context of this belief Christian hermits are persons who have been called to transcend, as best they can, their individual limitations, be they introvert or extrovert, and to befriend the whole world by remaining alone as much as possible, fully immersed in God. There is no need for them to throw a bomb or write a book. If they are true to their calling, in some mysterious way, they already minister to the unity of humanity.

Question for May 1998 issue:

What sort of work do you do to support yourself? How do you balance work with contemplative solitude?

Please limit your response to 150 words or less so we can print as many as possible. Thanks!

Deadline: April 5, 1998

BOOK NOTICES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

On Meaningful Work by Thomas Moore.

By the author of "Care of the Soul", these cassettes discuss how we can restore fullness and depth to this dimension of our lives. Work was not always a "job" but rather a summons to a special destiny. 2 Cassettes \$18.95. Order through "Sounds True". TEL: 800-333-9185

Faithful Listening ö Discernment in Everyday Life by Joan Mueller, Ph.D.

A textured overview of this practical charism of the Spirit; how, when, where and why to discern. 140 pp. Paper \$14.95. Order through Sheed & Ward. TEL: 800-333-7373

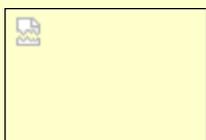
Calmly Plotting the Resurrection ö Lenten Reflections for Individuals and Groups by Donna E. Schaper

Readers are taken through the planting and watering of their lives in preparation for Easter. Paper 104 pp. United Church Press, 1996 ISBN 0-8298-1067-6 \$7.95

The Desert ö An Anthology for Lent by John Moses.

Part one introduces the concepts behind the desert story and spirituality; part two includes readings around Lenten themes by ancient and contemporary writers.

Paper 157 pp. Morehouse Publishing, 1997. ISBN 0-8192-1728-X \$12.95



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