



Raven's Bread

Food for Those in Solitude

Vol: 4 No: 2 May 2000

Raven's Bread is a quarterly newsletter 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 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 is \$8.00 in U.S. currency. (International money orders are the most convenient form of payment by foreign subscribers.) Any extra donations will be used to subsidize subscriptions for hermits who cannot afford the full cost.

To E-mail **Raven's Bread** directly click on this link: fredette@nclink.net

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

By: Veronica Gordon-Smith, Edinburgh, Scotland

The most powerful prayer... is that which proceeds from an empty spirit. The empty spirit can do everything.ä (Eckhart)

Life-altering illness or disability, whatever its nature, can be a profound Teacher on the contemplative path. It can empty the whole being, body and spirit. You may be emptied of all plans, ambitions (even the ambition to be a good hermit), of independence (physical or financial), professional activities, interests and status; even, sadly, of relationships with some friends or family members. Like Job, you may rage at God - and He hears you - until the wonderful day (looking back you're not quite sure when it happened) when you begin to let go and slowly learn to live "without a why" (Eckhart again). You begin to relax into God and let Him support you in this new life He has given you. This can take awhile.

It can be a profound stripping, forcing a simplification in every aspect of your life. It can also be a profound freeing, leading to a true detachment and emptiness of spirit, one which allows God to work freely: "God cannot help but give himself to the heart that is detached." (Eckhart)

Solitude of spirit becomes a reality, sometimes gut-wrenchingly so. If your condition varies unpredictably, you are no longer in control of your day. You live by God's rhythm, His Order of the Day, not your own. "If I am to be a solitary, I will be God's kind of solitary," said Thomas Merton.

Illness is not a disorder of life; it is part of the fabric of life. In Buddhist terms it is simply impermanence seen in higher relief (they understand this far better than we do.) Real life does not start when you get better (if you do); real life is now. You do everything you can to treat the illness, and leave the rest to God.

To your surprise, after (or even during) physical pain, fear, loneliness, discouragement or whatever is thrown at you, joy and humor can bubble up and you may catch yourself muttering, "Let every groan and grumble praise the Lord!" Eventually you return to the Divine Stillness within that remains undisturbed by these passing hurricanes. If sleep eludes you at night, God is at his closest. If the body protests and formal prayer is impossible the best remedy (especially for the highly motivated folk like hermits) may be rest, relaxing in God - just sitting exhausted in your chair. "O rest in the Lord; wait patiently for Him. And He shall give you your heart's desire," sings the psalmist.

And the Lotus Scripture adds touchingly "Anyone who, with distracted mind, has offered worship, by merely folding the hands ...or offering a flower...or slightly bending the head...attains the supreme Way."

Then every so often the veil parts and you glimpse, as in a mirror darkly, the richness of life, the joy, the beauty, the perfection of things ÷ all that is necessary is for the spirit to remain "alive and pure and alert," as my Teacher once said to me. Everything is just as it should be, and all is well.

A Word from Still Wood

Our daffodils are standing up bravely amid swirling snowflakes this day in early April. The sight is an apt image of the reflections by the contributors to this issue. When we took Bob Williams' suggestion to propose a discussion of disabilities in relation to a life of prayer and solitude, we were quite unprepared for the many moving responses we would receive - so many, in fact, that we have to save some for the next issue!

RB arrives at your door when we are celebrating the victory of Life through death. The lives and stories and hard-won insights we share with you in this issue are further celebrations of how Life not only overcomes death but triumphs in the very acceptance of pain, weakness and loss. The "disabilities" shared are of various kinds ranging from mental conditions to progressively disabling diseases; from the disability of a beloved child to the depressing limitations imposed by aging. In the sharings of our readers, all become grace!

Must a person enjoy perfect health in order to live the eremitical life? I wrestled with that question when I first set out for hermit life limited by fibromyalgia and the energy drain created by pain and fatigue. The paradox was that I would never have discovered the attraction of solitude had it not been imposed on me by my physical debility. Very slowly I learned, as have many of you, that I couldn't wait until I was "all better" to find real life; to experience genuine prayer; to serve the Lord in selfless love. I had to find my Lord IN my pain, not despite it. I had to serve my Lord and others through aching weakness, not in strength and power.

We have found our niche in God's kingdom as solitaries because we so desperately need to live in continual awareness of the Lord - our passion is to be ever responding to The Presence. When we discover divinity manifesting Itself in our own bodies through pain and limitations, joy blossoms like daffodils amid the snow.

We warmly welcome the over sixty new subscribers who have recently joined RB's readership - coming from such diverse places as Malaysia and Poland; South India and the Orkney Isles. Also we salute our on-line seekers who have "hit" our website over 1700 times since we entered this second millenium. Thanks to all you generous friends who keep Raven's Bread self-sustaining. Let us continue to nurture one another through sharing our "bread" of word and prayer; gift and grace.

With Grateful love,

Karen & Paul

~~~~~*Resounding Solitude*~~~~~

Editorsâ Note: The following reflections resound like the many bells of a carrillon, âringing the changesâ and variations on the theme of disabilities vis-a-vis prayer and solitude.

Multiple Losses; Multiple Gains

By Robert Williams, Laconia, IN

This listing of conditions and symptoms are just the tip of the iceberg. 1. Spasmodic Torticollis Dystonia: a progressive debilitating neuro-muscular condition resulting in the muscles opposing each other 24 hours per day. 2. Progressive hearing loss. 3. Parkinsonâs Disease - more movement problems such as movements not completed, tremors; rigidity, postural instability and others 4. Selective Intellectual Impairment manifested by slowness of information processing, impairment of ability to innovate, organize, plan and sequence; difficulty in retaining what is read; problems with simple math and spelling; constant forgetfulness. 5. Now there is âsomethingâ wrong with my eyes!

To this list of negative facts, I would like to append a list of positive possibilities to be found in this situation. 1. Self-esteem becomes self-worth in Godâs love. 2. Expected productivity according the worldâs standards disappears. 3. Being in control diminishes to dependence and vulnerability. 4. A slowing down ÷ -- way down. 5. Shifting priorities resulting in a very, very short list of what is really important. 6. The intellectual impairments result in the opportunity to live out of the heart and less out of the cortex. 7. Steps toward greater authenticity. 8. An ever growing realization that âGod is enough.â

Even with this rather personal list, it doesnât take too much effort to see the potential for the solitary. We struggle up the ladder of acquisition, power and growth until we reach a pivotal point where the energy is reversed. Instead of being sustained by that which is less than us, we arrive at the place of receptivity, gentleness, receiving not gaining, being nurtured and sustained from above.

Grace does not come from a disability (cross) but works in the midst of it, responding to a willing assent and embrace. For Christ, the cross was only attractive in its relation to the Father. For us, the cross is only acceptable in its relation to Jesus. Here is where the joy descends and the burden is bearable. We find ourselves in the Celtic âthin placeâ ÷ just there, where time and space brush close to eternity and Godâs upside-down kingdom is glimpsed.

So the cell, I discover, is not that hut Iâve been going to build back in the woods on our place for the last twenty years. Nor is the cell the disabilities that would isolate me from a normal active life. The true cell is being hidden in Christ, sharing his cross, and being transformed by the experience of suffering through the power and love of the Holy Spirit.

Through all this discussion, I think of ... whatâs his name... the physics guy... Hawkins?? sitting in his computerized wheel chair communicating with the scientific world by special computer. Why canât a disabled hermit take it one step further and live a life in the Spirit communicating in silence? What a challenge! What an opportunity!

Variations on a Theme

By Carole Caulombe, Ottawa, ONT

I am still very much a neophyte when it comes to the eremitical life. But the topic proposed for this issue prompted me to share something of my own situation. I had felt called to a life of silence, solitude and prayer since about the age of ten, and eventually entered religious life ÷ an active teaching community in which I could not find my place. Eventually I left, married and had four beautiful children. Later my marriage was annulled.

Through all of this, the call to silence and prayer remained. About five years ago I read an article about an urban hermit in Philadelphia (who urged me to subscribe to Ravenâs Bread!) Through your journal and other readings he directed me to, I began to realize that the eremitical life was not necessarily confined to a solitary soul in the woods ... that there existed variations on the theme.

The disability which had concerned me was not my own. It was that of my youngest child, my beautiful fifteen year-old daughter who has Downâs syndrome. As deeply as I love Anna, I had feared that being her caregiver rendered my life incompatible with the life of solitude. But through prayer and reading, it gradually became clear to me that, far from being an obstacle, Anna, who has been a channel of grace in my life from the day of her birth, and in the lives of many people, was in fact the doorway through which I could enter into the life of deeper communion with God.

Through her gift of being mentally challenged, Anna lives in a world of silence, of gentleness, of enjoyment of physical work, and of attention to the present moment. Could anyone discerning the eremitical vocation ask for more? Her disability allows me to respond to my call, and keeps me grounded! What I have to deal with now are finding ways to support the two of us from our home, and learning to feel comfortable refusing the frequent requests I receive for extensive involvement in parish ministry!

Dilemma of Diminishment

Linda McFarland, Lake Junaluska, NC

Regardless of how able, ânormalâ we were at birth, aging inevitably means changes in our ability, and in the language of our culture, we become âdisabled.â Body parts begin to wear out, work less efficiently; physical senses become less keen over time.

The physical changes which have affected me most are âtenderâ knees, both of which have been repaired arthroscopically, and hearing loss and ringing in one ear. Iâve adjusted to the knees: I avoid steps when possible, Iâve altered my yoga practice, and I do added exercises with weights. My ear problem, diagnosed as Meniereâs syndrome, is more challenging. My right ear feels as though Iâm wearing an ear plug and it rings and amplifies any background noise

... VERY distracting at best. My doctor says a hearing aid would only intensify the problem.

So as our bodies ask for compassion and comfort, how does this affect our spirits? For starters, we are invited to slow down, to give ourselves a break. I can still take a daily walk, but at a more relaxed pace. I can hear you - my left ear still works fine ÷ but I need to be in the same room with you (a pleasant arrangement for conversation!) I am much more appreciative of what I can still hear and enjoy: the subtleties of bird song and wind in the trees and soft music. Silence is especially welcome, for then the static in my ear settles down.

And so my dilemma: how much of this reality, this diminishment, do I accept and accommodate, and how much do I keep working to hold onto, or even reclaim? Where do I give in (okay, I KNOW I will never run again, and probably not play tennis) and where do I hang in (I did buy some hiking poles so I can stay on the trails with more ease)? Having been more vigorous in my youth, now I can settle into less frenzied forms of exercise and still stay fit. Gardening, toting groceries, and cleaning house are also part of my routine.

Pain and disability help me focus my attention on easier, more comfortable ways of accomplishing my daily tasks, on what I am still ABLE to do, and on transcending my body, becoming more at one with the eternal.

I have to admit my limitations and ask for help, a new experience for tough, independent, self-sufficient me. Diminished abilities invite experimentation and invention; even opportunities to mess up, to appear less than graceful. Can I approach this with humor and laugh at my foibles, my less-than-perfect humanity?

Each day allows me to start afresh and celebrate BEING, being here for another sunrise, and celebrating what still works in my body. Regardless of my physical changes, the spiritual solace and grace of a changeless divinity are constant. As I see, hear, taste less keenly in the outer, material sense, my inner sight, hearing, taste ripens, deepens and grows in ways I could not have imagined. What can I hear that is beyond the noise of sound waves? God meets me in the stillness, exceeding my senses.

The Search

Whether one moves slowly or with speed,
the one who is a seeker will be a finder.
Always seek with your whole self,
for the search is an excellent guide on the way.
Though you are lame and limping,
though your figure is bent and clumsy,
always creep towards the One.
Make that One your quest.
By speech and by silence and by fragrance,
catch the scent of the King everywhere.

By: Rumi

From Waste to Joy

By Carol Riley, Orkney Isles, UK

Disability is a purely human term. In God we are all WHOLE and ENTIRE, whatever the world may say. Over thirty years ago I was diagnosed as mentally ill, given drugs, treatments, etc. etc. Such is the stigma of this modern day leprosy that it ended a very bright career and most relationships. I have thus been registered as disabled for most of my adult life.

A couple years ago, I began to be very suspicious about the drugs I was on, which were not being monitored at all. So I began the appallingly painful process of getting off them. I have seen hell. These drugs are more addictive than heroin. It has emerged that most of the mental and emotional suffering in my life has been the result of wrongly prescribed and very damaging drugs. I was never mentally ill. It was a gigantic misdiagnosis, compounded over thirty years. The illness all along has been M.E. (in America you call it Chronic Fatigue Syndrome.)

I was brought up in the church. I never stopped praying but had never enjoyed any sense of God. One day, here in my garden, God made his love known to me in such a way that I could never doubt His caring, let alone his existence. The agonising loneliness of my life was explained and healed.

I know that with this illness, the limited health I have now is all I am ever likely to have. AND THIS IS FINE!!! There is so much Joy in my life, so much simple pleasure. I have learned the great secret that there is happiness to be found in tiny things; I call it my Pollyanna Syndrome. I had become unable to cope with human company. This is better now - I can see folk here but I still cannot go out among people. I was totally amazed to read Eugene Stockton's assessment of the eremitical life! (RB Feb. 2000) He expressed what I had been led to find already! For me, my life now is not a desert. The desert was the long, long passage of years when I was not myself. That was truly a desert. I look back and shudder.

I have lived for the past seven years in an isolated cottage on a wild, windswept island off the north of Scotland. I live very simply, with a goat for milk, hens for eggs, vegetables in the garden and peafowl for sheer soul-food. My life is governed by the seasons, by seed-time and harvest, by eggs and no-eggs; by the weather and the tides. This house, that was for years a lonely prison, has become a sanctuary, a place of peace and shelter from which I reach out to others. I lack nothing. Even when I am too ill to do much, I just wait for God. I have taken wrong turnings and probably will do so again, being human, but I will always return to my Source with a deep sigh of HOMECOMING. A huge compassion flows from God to me and through me. I am learning to give far more than I have ever done and it is a joyous privilege. One of my greatest needs is for comfort, to know that others care. So, now I never let anyone in trouble go uncomforted. I always send a letter or a card or bake a cake or knit or sew or offer to help ... and I tell them that I am praying.

Even when I can only lie in bed or in the garden, I can gaze at beauty, the skyscapes we get here, the flowers, and be lost in the wonder of the created world. I realise that, just as there is no disability with God, neither is there any Time. I have come late to my vocation; but this does not matter. I AM HERE, AND I AM HIS. That is enough.

**Topic for August 2000 Issue:
Continuation of present Discussion on Disability
Deadline: July 3, 2000**

Resources Available from *Raven's Bread*

Readings in Spirituality - Annotated Bibliography by Sharon Jeanne Smith **31pp. \$10.00**

Solitude & Union: A Select Bibliography on the Hermit Way of Life by Cecilia W. Wilms **26pp. \$8.00**

Commentary on Canon 603 from "The Law of Consecrated Life" by Jean Beyer SJ, 1988 Translated from the French by W. Becker, 1992 **10pp. \$3.00**

Hermits: The Juridical Implications of Canon 603 by Helen L. Macdonald, Researcher Novalis: St. Paul University, Ottawa, ONT **24pp. \$8.00**

Notes to Guide the Beginning Hermit by A Hermit of Mercy **15pp. \$5.00**

Statutes for Hermits by The Bishops of France (1989) **12 pp. \$4.00**

Discernment Survey 1996 **6pp. \$2.00**

Raven's Rest

The Silence...The Solitude...The Solace of God...

Retreatants welcome to schedule time 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 \$20.00 per day includes meals. For further information, contact:

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BOOK NOTICES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Premeditated Mercy by Joseph Nassal, C.P.P.S. *This book maps out scripturally sound ways to set the table for forgiveness and communion, to find room at the table for all - for the beloved as well as the betrayer - a task every hermit must take on.* Paper 247pp \$12.95 Forest of Peace Publishing, Inc., P.O. Box 269, Leavenworth, KS 66048-0269. TEL:1-800-659-3227

A monthly publication of interest to RB readers: "**Living With Christ**" *Every Catholic's most practical and complete resource for daily worship and personal prayer.* Published by Novalis, based at St. Paul University, Ottawa; One year - \$11.97 US; Order from: Novalis, P.O. Box 216, Rouses Point, NY 12979-9931; Ph: 1-800-387-7164

The Lay Contemplative Edited by Virginia Manss & Mary Frohlich *A blend of story, theory and practical help for the many people who feel called to pursue a contemplative prayer life while living in the world .* 2000 Paper, 216pp. \$10.95 St. Anthony Messenger Press, 1615 Republic St., Cincinnati, OH 45210-1298; Ph: 1-800-488-0488

The Life of the Jura Fathers Trans. by Tim Vivian, Kim Vivian & Jeffrey Burton Russell. *The Lives of Sts. Romanus, Lupicinus and Eugendus, hermits and monks who founded monasteries in the Jura region in 5th century.* Paper \$16.95 Cistercian Publications St. Joseph's Abbey, 167 N. Spencer Rd. Spencer, MA 01562-1233; Ph. 508-885-8730

Seven Days of Solitude, A Guidebook for a Personal Retreat by Brother Ramon, SSF. *Provides the guidance and resources for a week-long period of prayer, meditation and solitude.* 2000 Paper 179pp. \$13.95 Liguori Publications, One Liguori Dr., Liguori, MO 63057; Ph. 314-464-2500



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