

What canst thou say?

You will say, Christ saith this, and the apostles say this: but what canst thou say? Art thou a child of Light and hast thou walked in the Light, and what thou speakest, is it inwardly from God?

—George Fox

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SOLITUDE

THIS DESERT LAND

by Amy Perry

Having plenty of time stretching out ahead of me makes me feel very free and relaxed. I have time to do whatever I want at Our Lady of Solitude in the Arizona desert. I can leaf through the hermitage guidebook with its quotations on silence and solitude, read the book Sister Therese has lent me (which on two occasions has turned out to be just the book I needed), draw with my markers, write in my spiral notebook journal, do a little bit of yoga (being sure to stay far enough away from the icon of Christ on the lace-covered table in the icon corner), do centering prayer, carefully draw the vertical blinds back so I can see out the sliding glass doors, go for a long walk, fix oatmeal or salad or a peanut butter sandwich, wash my dishes, push the hand-powered sweeper over the carpet, or walk down the road to the circular white chapel. There I can go inside to read or pray or I can sit outside on the bench overlooking the eastern valleys.

I sometimes miss my loved ones, and I think occasionally of my colleagues at work. But I love just sitting and looking. I love to stare outside from my hermitage. During the day sometimes I choose a shadow to keep tabs on and watch its tip retreat across the sand from one rock to another. I like to gaze at the bumpy earth, the occasionally glinting gravel paths, the unidentifiable scrubby plants, the waving of the gray ocotillo limbs, the tan mesas green-polka-dotted with saguaros, the blackish foothills, the purple mountains behind them, and the tiny red taillights of the cars and trucks as they wind up the bare thin stripe of I-17, disappear behind the hills, and reappear higher up.

As I'm out walking, sometimes a movement catches my eye and alerts me to a bright-eyed jackrabbit who gracefully leaps, then stops, then leaps again; or to a Gambrel quail, her curly crest held high and her little ones toddling along after her. Or I hear the KREEE of a hawk over the hum of the cars. Or I just find a flat rock to sit down on and watch the ants march by.

Sometimes when I'm inside my hermitage reading, the chattering of sparrows makes me look up. Three or four of them will be flitting around the porch railings and talking to each other. I feel as if they are honoring me with a visit. I like the constantly recurring whirr-rrrrrrr-aiiaiaaannnnhhhhh's of the rattlesnakes. Out beyond my porch a soft buzz emanates, sharpens, and fades away. Somewhere else another soft buzz emanates, sharpens, and fades away. Floating, hovering, the stark calls cover the land, as the desert covers the earth, as . . . God . . . inhabits it all.

In the evenings, I like to glance across the way at Sister Therese in her red-checked dress and white tennis shoes as she paces her porch and prays. Then I hike up the paved road to the main mesa to make my nightly circuit as I watch the sun drop behind the next-highest notch in the western mountain ridge. I feel the air cool on my arms. I like to notice when the tan shades of the ground ahead of me take on a subtle pinkish purple tint, then shift to gray, then disappear in the darkness.

I watch the colors darken in the sky above what I have named "The Sleeping Woman" mesas to the southeast, above the low sloping hills to the south, above the long overlapping ridges to the southwest and west, above the "Faraway Mountains" to the northwest, and above the "Sliced Mesa" and the "Rampart Mesa" to the north, above the "Thumb" outcropping in the northeast, above the "Three Purple Friends" mountains to the east. I tilt my head back and look for the Swan, then turn my head left and hope it's dark enough for the Big Dipper to be visible. Sometimes, to my delight, I see a shooting star.

When I've drunk in enough, I make my way down the dark road to where I know it will fork. I head right, toward where I know my hermitage is. Getting ready for bed, I have all the lights turned off except for the small desk lamp, and I leave the blinds open so I can see the taillights snaking along and see the lit windows of Black Canyon City scattered below me. After I turn off the desk lamp, often I step out on the northern porch to take a last look at the stars, my nightgown billowing in the wind.

From the Editor,

Even as Friends write of solitude, they create a community of those who value silence and the inner path. I was moved to suggest this topic because my own times of solitude offered both challenges and rewards. Sharing here in the way that we do, has expanded my perspectives. I feel enriched by these generous authors whose experiences range from the ecstatic to the cautious, the analytic to the poetic, the mystical to the contemplative, the subtle to the transformational.

--Linda Lee, editor for this issue

I feel closest to God when I'm in the vastness of the desert. Having time in solitude there gives me time to experience God. I think Hosea 2:16 has it right: "I will lead her into the Desert and speak to her heart."]

♪ Amy Perry makes silent retreats at Our Lady of Solitude Contemplative House of Prayer in Black Canyon City, Arizona. She is a member of First Friends Meeting, Indianapolis, Indiana.

LEARNING TO LOVE SOLITUDE

By Phil Rizzo

Solitude; a sailboat running free silhouetted against a warm glowing sunset or a gloomy freighter looming on a cold horizon.

There was a time, after a divorce, when solitude was my enemy. I was separated from my family and alone for the first time in my life. Anxiety came thundering relentlessly into my head. My solution (interesting that solitude and solution have the same prefix) was to fill every moment with activity.

That was when I met psychotherapist Edith Stauffer. She introduced me to the spiritual world I'd been denied in the conventional churches I'd attended. "The problem," she said, "is that you don't like your own company." Better put, I couldn't stand myself. I took most of the responsibility for the break-up. Self-condemnation slimmed my self-worth like a stick being shaved with a knife. She said, "You are accumulating guilt and guilt is an invitation to punishment." I learned that self-condemnation separates me from my higher nature where the solutions lie . . . forgiveness, self-acceptance, unconditional love. It was one big-time wake-up call.

Edith suggested that I try meditation, prayer, active imagination and a study schedule that included everything from the Bible to the Bhagavad-Gita, Religious Science to Paramahansa Yogananda's biography. The most significant was called Psychosynthesis, the work of Italian psychiatrist Roberto Assagioli. Later choices were the works of Krishnamurti and in 1992, Orange Grove Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends.

Sometimes I sat with my eyes closed, attempting to relax in my little apartment. I tried to be in the moment, to rest my consciousness, to leave my thoughts to themselves. Instead I focused more clearly on my anxiety: "I hate my life. I am responsible for all the world's ills. I am not ready. The time is not right." I'd try a mantra. I'd pretend to be a bag of sand with a hole in it, watch the sand gradually run out. Focus my mind on one hand. Listen to Morning at Some Pond tape. Fidget and fidget some more.

As months passed, I occasionally discovered interesting new feelings. One day I learned to watch my mind flow into places I have never been before—places that I must have been invited to, because I never could have found them alone.

As I look back some 35 to 40 years, that was not only a revolutionary time, but my efforts served as a catalyst for some greater healing that goes on, I'm sure, forever.

While living alone for seven years before I married Suzie, I learned to love my solitude. I think I'm a more centered and aware partner as a result.

♪ Phil Rizzo is a member of Orange Grove Meeting in California.

I hold this to be the highest task of a bond between two people: that each should stand guard over the solitude of the other. For, if it lies in the nature of indifference and of the crowd to recognize no solitude, then love and friendship are there for the purpose of continually providing the opportunity for solitude. And only those are the true sharings which rhythmically interrupt periods of deep isolation.

Letters on Love Rainer Maria Rilke

The contemplative withdraws into solitude, not to evade reality, but to find things and accept them as they are. The contemplative thinks not of himself; the neurotic thinks only of himself.

William H. Shannon,
Thomas Merton's Dark Path
(from Jim Flory's collection of quotes on his Contemplative Quakerism web site
www.orednet.org/~jflory/silence.htm)

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BALANCING SOLITUDE WITH SOCIETY

By Scott Crom

Many Quakers value periods of solitude as an opportunity for private meditation and worship, as a time for renewal and refreshment, and perhaps as a period of re-evaluation or self-examination. For some of us, however, and in some circumstances, solitude can become a tempting trap.

Solitude came naturally to me for various reasons. By nature I tend to be more introverted than extroverted. By nurture I was the only child of a mother who was widowed early. I did have many friends and playmates in the neighborhood and at school. In junior high and high school I happily took part in a variety of group activities, yet I was also apt to spend much time in solitary activities such as reading, working with a chemistry set, or building model airplanes.

My teaching career had a similar balance of the social and the solitary. Classes, individual student conferences, faculty and committee meetings—all clearly involved interaction. But class preparation, marking exams and papers, and writing all had to be solitary activities.

A little over eight years ago the balance of social and solitary underwent a significant change when my retirement and the death of my wife occurred within the same year. After a period of adjustment, I found my solitary times were much longer and more frequent. Fortunately, my college supplied me with a tiny office on the edge of campus, so I formed the custom of walking to that office each morning. In mid-morning I'd cross the campus for a faculty coffee hour.

That hour helped to take care of the needs for interaction and socializing, but I also found that need could be met in significant part on the Internet. As a member of several Quaker electronic mailing lists and newsgroups, I could feel that I was part of a group, even though I seldom contributed. On the whole, however, I relished my times of solitude, primarily because I was free from demands on my attention other than those I chose.

My hours of solitude give me material to bring to meeting for worship, often something for me to hold in the Light, and the meeting for worship enriches my subsequent solitude, giving it direction and purpose. Just a month or two ago, however, that comfortable balance came into question because of external circumstances. This part of the country, like several others, had a record snowfall for the month of December, along with near-record cold temperatures. There were at least two periods of three or four days when I didn't leave the house. I reveled in the solitude, and got caught up on a list of pending chores and small tasks.

It came as something of a surprise to me that at the end of both of those periods I was somewhat reluctant to emerge. It would have been all too easy to become a recluse, making only occasional forays out to the grocery store or a shopping center.

Fortunately, I was able to nip that natural tendency in the bud, and easily enough managed to recapture the "both-and" aspects of my usual life. I suggest that it behooves each of us to know our own tendencies and temptations. It is indeed good to work and live from our own capabilities or positions of strength. Yet we must not allow them to become a trap, nor let our weaker sides atrophy or fall into disrepair.

♪ Scott Crom is a member of the Beloit, WI, Monthly Meeting. He is a retired teacher of philosophy and religion.

IN STILLNESS

By Bruce Nagel

Rescued daffodils,
Laughing on the tea table,
Chide the outdoor snow.

Drifts of melting snow
Invite the sun to warm them
As they surrender.

tinkling windchimes
play whimsically for
dancing butterfly

fly's buzz
weaves between notes
of windchimes

rhodendron
offers captured raindrops
to bumblebee

rising mist
hides and unmask sandpipers
by tidal pools

Any one haiku is about solitude, since in its essence a haiku is meant to capture a given timeless moment, a snapshot if you will, divorced from time, suspended, alone and entire in itself.

For me solitude has far less to do with outward circumstances, the state of being physically alone, than with an inner state of centeredness. It is in no way incompatible with outward circumstances that are busy, noisy, and cluttered. I've been in situations in which no one else was around, often for prolonged periods of time, and yet I've sometimes brought with me the "monkey mind" of clatter, turmoil, and busyness, which is anything by solitude.

At other times, in the most frantic and distracting of situations I have known the continual awareness of inner stillness, silence, and quietude which allows me to be intimately aware of all that is occurring “out there” and be active, responsive, and compassionate to the circumstances. I am floating effortlessly through what needs to be done. Such is productive of a profound loss of “I-ness” and a unity with What Is, which is for me the true nature of Reality. Thus solitude becomes far less an apartness than it is a Oneness or Unity with all else which is ultimately and continually birthed from, and identical with, the fecund Stillness. I struggle with names—God, the Way, Tao—none are adequate.

There really is a Stillness at the center of things. We can live out of that Stillness, even while fully embracing the muddle and messiness, the richness and welter, of all that is.

♪ *Bruce Nagle is a member of Beloit Monthly Meeting, WI. His interest is in the direct expression of the Ineffable.*

IN SOLITUDE

By Allison Randall

In solitude, in solitude, I come to God in prayer.

In silence and simplicity my soul finds solace there . . .

I don’t know if those are the right words to the song, but they are what come to me when I think of solitude. My first remembered experience of transcendence (that incredible all-encompassing oneness with everything, the soul’s experiential knowledge of the existence of and presence of, the permeating being of God) happened in solitude.

I was ten or eleven, lying on my back in a field in the summertime, looking up through the tall weeds on to and through the tree branches on to and through the white clouds on to and through the blue sky beyond. . . .and my hard human back dissolved into the warm grass beneath it, and beyond it into the ground and rocks and deeper and deeper into the beyond, on and on and on, no me, no them, no boundaries and separations, but instead all Oneness, a grand and still and amazingly forever Oneness everlastingly on and on and on.

Throughout my teenage years I had a great yearning for closeness with God. I think most of us human beings do, though we might not recognize it as such. My soul found some relief in a Quaker camp in the Adirondacks, in solitude by the fire at night, and in a newfound solitude that sometimes happened even as I was among other people. And in walks in the woods, at Back Log Camp, or at home in Ohio.

In my twenties, as my family grew, so did that yearning. Pregnancy and mothering have many moments of bringing one close to the Holy, making one keenly aware of the Divine, and many hours when mothering can keep you from the solitude which is often necessary for a more complete connection with the Divine. And so the yearning grew.

When I was 27 and my second child was an infant, I took a course in Transcendental Meditation (as did so many others during the seventies). After being instructed in that technique of meditation, we were told to practice twice a day for 20 minutes. My first experience with it was a transcendent experience, and I was overwhelmed with the Great oneness again. I began meditating dutifully twice a day, thrilled with the close connection with God, the incredible feelings of peacefulness, of not only being held by, but being held in, being part of the Oneness, the Peace, the Love, the Forever, the Divine. My main reason for continuing meditation was that I wanted more of those experiences. What can bring more delight than that complete closeness, that dissolving of Self into the All?

When my children were young, I didn’t always get to meditate twice a day. And my children noticed the difference when I didn’t! I remember one of them at age five, when I spoke unusually harshly to him, asking me in a rather parental voice, “Mom, have you meditated yet today?”

When I was perhaps in my late thirties I discovered that these times of meditation, of worship, were quite the thing with early Quakers. What I was doing was taking daily “retirement.” I was being an old fashioned mainstream Quaker by employing this Eastern meditation technique! That was no real surprise, since I fairly frequently would experience in meeting for worship something similar to what I so often experienced in solitude at home.

By this time I had also learned that daily practice did not lead each and every time to the experience of Oneness. But having experienced God so fully, I knew full well that God was there, that I was always in The Presence whether I could feel it, sense it, or not. And I knew that taking that time in solitude with God every

day was extremely important for my spiritual well being. Being open to God, sitting still and quietly and purposefully in The Presence, had become very important to me. It felt as if God and I had two appointments a day, rather like tea engagements, but with silent conversation. And as we conversed, we got to know each other better.

*In solitude, in solitude I come to God in prayer.
In silence and simplicity
My spirit blossoms there,
My spirit blossoms there.*

Ruth Duck,

Worship in Song, FGC Hymnal # 140

In my early fifties, I had a traumatizing experience of abuse. I was knocked off center. I was smashed like a walnut struck a hammer. I found my heart closing off from others, in what I now believe was an instinctive effort to protect myself. As a result of the post-traumatic stress syndrome, I was frequently afraid to be with others, so I spent much more time in solitude than ever before. I turned inward. For a year and a half I struggled at least twice every day to get back to that center, to find that Oneness in God.

As I turned away from others, I became more fully dependent on God. Even though I frequently felt off center, or even lost as I never before had been lost, the Divine was holding me in a way I don't understand and am at a loss for words to explain. God and I became closer in a new way, a more profound way. We struggled, we labored together, we tore me apart and put me back together again. I was driven deeper and deeper. And I felt strongly that my years of practicing being in solitude with the Divine kept me from going crazy during those difficult times—helped me to grow, instead.

♪ Allison Randall, a member of Monadnock Meeting in Jaffrey, NH, attends Keene Friends Worship Group.

REFLECTIONS ON LIVING REVERENTLY

By Marlou Carlson

I believe I have learned something valuable about the rhythm of activity and reflection in my life and how work needs to be centered. It has been more than two years since I retired from my day job. It was an early retirement, taken with much gratitude for many fulfilling years of teaching elementary school, and with the deliberate intention of having more time for the volunteer work that I was already doing among Friends. For several years before my retirement, I had felt moved to work in religious education. Without much introspection, I had agreed to serve on the RE committees of my monthly meeting, yearly meeting, and Friends General Conference. Through the FGC committee, I became involved in the new Traveling Ministries Program.

As a retiree, I hoped to do all this work more thoroughly and perhaps even add a dimension or two. I was expecting time to open before me like an expanse of blue prairie sky. It didn't. I was expecting tasks to be like play because I was so eagerly anticipating them. They weren't.

Among the first lessons presented in my new life was the contrast between work required by employment and work undertaken by choice. In the former, decisions are made according to convention or by someone else. An individual approach

may be taken toward how certain tasks are accomplished, and the results may take on a distinctive flair. Still, the individual has not chosen that task nor discerned whether it is fitting.

Work undertaken by choice needs a different quality of discernment and careful centering in God. As the days went by, I noticed that I was experiencing my Quaker volunteer work much the way I had experienced the unchosen tasks of my public school work. Somehow the work was there without my having discerned whether I was called to it and without my having held it up in prayer.

I still yearned for the time to pursue interests, engage in favorite pastimes, and heed artistic whims. As I worked, God wasn't present in my heart to the extent that I had anticipated. I was surprised. I had expected that when the pressure of

the secular schedule was removed there would be a great sense of relief and joy, and the presence of God would automatically flood in to infuse my work.

A longing for joy in the presence of God very soon led to establishing a spiritual practice as the anchor of each day. Every morning came to include a time of reading both inspirational pieces and scripture followed by prayer and worship. The blessing was that now there was time unscheduled by the secular world in which to enjoy this practice.

It was something of a shock to discover that all sorts of things needed discernment: which tasks to continue, which to lay down, which to do now, which to do later, and which new tasks to consider. It was not just the "important" tasks of clerking the First Day School committee meeting, or writing my piece for the book for Quaker parents, that needed the discernment and prayer. It was everything. Dusting, dishwashing, and weeding all needed discernment and prayer. All the mundane things of life needed to be held in prayer if I wanted to experience the presence of God in all those things. If I wanted to experience the joy of God's presence during the committee meeting, I needed to invite God's presence while I packed the suitcase. If I wanted God's presence during the time set aside for writing, I needed to invite it while I dusted the desk and sharpened the pencils.

The next lesson that became apparent was about the number of activities that could be sustained in the reverent life. As I began to consistently hold each undertaking in prayer, I noticed that when it was set aside for the day or completed, I would sink into quiet and reflection, giving thanks. Sometimes the number of minutes needed for this period of reflection was large. I noticed that God spoke in these quiet times and that I wanted to listen attentively. These became times of savoring the enjoyment of work or of satisfaction in a job well done. A rhythm of reading, prayer and worship followed by work, then reflection and thanksgiving, blossomed in my daily life.

Solitude gives birth to the original in us, to beauty unfamiliar and perilous—to poetry.

Thomas Mann

It seemed that if one allowed this rhythm to flow, enjoyment and awareness of God's presence increased. The light in the shiny glass, the warmth and softness of the dry towel, the beauty of the polished surface, the fragrance of a plant, the regular angles of a stack of stamped envelopes, brought that deep inner joy recognized more completely, God's blessed presence. During these quiet times my attention would eventually be called to the question of what should come next. With prayer, I would be able to discern the next step or task. More and more the work became God's.

More and More I noticed that I was too busy. There were simply too many tasks to give time to this naturally developing rhythm. If I did all the tasks on the list, I wouldn't be able to yield to the rhythm. The rhythm was God-given. I longed to comply.

How was it that I had taken on all these many tasks? Pondering, I saw that I had considered myself unworthy unless I was in service to others. If I was not doing good works, I was nobody. For years I had been committing the great sin of not believing that I was a worthy soul, a true child of God, by just being. When I saw a need, I plunged right in to fill it, correct it, save it, or do it right. The question, "Is this my task?" had not been examined. Without thinking, I had planned each day with one task after another. I had joined the hectic society of frantic over-doers. Even in retirement I was overwhelmed and uncentered.

Over the years I have delighted in sharing responsibilities with others whose developing gifts I encourage. The discernment and calling forth of the gifts of others are peculiar Quaker skills that I treasure and am gratefully learning more about through the experience of School of the Spirit. Yet I perceive that upholding another is also a kind of work. Being a presence while another is growing in the Spirit requires a level of energy that I have come to appreciate anew.

In some cases sharing the responsibility is harder and requires more thought and prayer than doing the particular task oneself. Nurturing another is work, inspired by God, demanding prayer, centeredness, and time for reflection and thanksgiving. The lesson seems to be that in discerning whether to take on certain work, thought needs to be given to the care of others.

One does not do Quaker volunteer work in a vacuum. A considerable amount of the work is done in committee meetings or in pairs. Carrying out the will of God requires paying attention to the others involved in that work. Everyone needs to be encouraged to listen to the "still small voice." Another part of this lesson is that the aspect of nurturing others increases the magnitude of spiritual energy in the work. The amount of attention needed for any given task, then, is increased, however lovingly, by the need to be a nurturing part of the community. Again I felt the longing to yield to the rhythm. I longed to be always centered in God, to embody a deeper level of respect for other children of God and for God's work, to live in an attitude of reverence.

This longing leads to less work, more carefully chosen, with enough time left for centering every aspect and for worship, prayer, reflection, and thanksgiving. I ache for simpler tasks, done more reverently, for the glory of God. More listening and less work seem imperative. Gently laying aside some of my work seems right. The more work laid aside, the clearer is the call to do so.

In *Wisdom Distilled from the Daily: Living the Rule of St. Benedict Today*, Joan Chittister describes treating everything as though "they were the vessels of the altar." To hold life in loving hands is a call that compels contemplation. Yesterday I set my word processor to printing in tiny, pretty letters on a scrap of bright yellow card stock, the prayer of Niklaus von Flue, Swiss saint. It just fits in my hand.

My Lord and my God, take all from me
that hinders me on my way to Thee.

My Lord and my God, give all to me
that furthers me on my way to Thee.

My Lord and my God, take me from me
and give me wholly to Thee.

♪ Marlou Carlson is a member of Duneland Friends Meeting in Valparaiso, Indiana (Illinois Yearly Meeting). She has been active in religious education since coming to the Religious Society of Friends in 1979, and has served FGC Traveling Ministries Program.

SOLO

by Linda Lee

Solitude taught me to welcome silence, to value what is simple, stark, and blank. Solitude is a monk in the desert, a nun kneeling on a stone floor. Solitude is bare as a sycamore in winter, bark peeled away to expose white flames licking the sky.

I am part sycamore—perpetually shedding bark, all knobs and scars, slow to leaf out, slow to let go of leaves once I have them, reaching out in clumsy ways, yet still reaching upward in a white blaze of yearning. Solitude taught me the value of loss. Even though there was pain in peeling away layers of fear, solitude gave me the gift of emptiness so that I could be filled anew.

Pronouncing "solitude" I linger over the three syllables and turn them over in both mouth and mind. "Sol"—I think of sun, illumination—yet the sound is like soul, or sole—only one. Then "I"—reinforcing the idea of one, alone, followed by "tude" and I think of etude and of singing my solo with my inner voice, dancing with movements from within my body instead of in patterned steps or in response to recorded music. And I think of tutor. Solitude was one of my best teachers.

At the beginning of that winter in Cape Cod solitude felt more like "alone." I was restless. Wandering walks took me

down a lane to a marsh, or on a path around the pond. Usually, I saw no one. To get to a town center I had to drive, so being with people had to be intentional.

I began these months of solitude with both determination and with hope. I knew this would be a time of exploration and I expected to dedicate myself to the experience of solitude and to go as deeply into it as I was able. I traveled on faith, in a dark time. For long hours the window glass was black. Chill winds ruffled the pond.

I prayed for healing, sang hymns, meditated, walked the beaches, the trails through piney woods. Layers I could not name dropped away like falling snow until my inner light seemed clear as bright sun on white snow. One day I woke up and knew God's love in its magnificence, safety, and joy. Solitude prepared me to receive this greatest gift of all, this blessing, this touchstone for my life.

♪ *Linda Lee is a member of First Friends Meeting in Indianapolis, Indiana. She spent five mostly solitary months in Cape Cod, Massachusetts several years ago.*

SOLITUDE AND SERVICE

by James Baker

About 4:30 a.m. of a spring morning I knock on the bedroom door of the elderly, diminutive, but weighty Friend whom I presently look after to tell her goodbye, and in the cool darkness begin the half-hour drive to my office. On the side streets I leave the car windows open to listen to the crickets and the robins sing the earth awake. There are few cars on the road so I begin to let my unconscious have more sway, yet remain outwardly alert for the occasional deer or impatient driver. The radio is off, for there are times when even Mozart's surpassingly lovely phrases and counterpoint are an intrusion. This time has become a hallowed place to commune with the Presence as I drive—of what and of whom must I be aware in this coming day?

The clinic building has been unlocked by the morning guard on his rounds, but I am the only one here when I unlock my office, deposit my things and shut the door to my sanctuary. I wake up my campus network computer by entering my current password, "Jesus," chosen to remind me whose pattern I try to follow. In my long-ago first lucid dream of Jesus, he answered my questions about how to relate to the people in my life—some of the answers became true years later. Since then I have realized that few people, except perhaps those who have had near-death experiences, know the full dimensions of who this universal being we call Jesus really is.

Now I have several uninterrupted hours to organize my day, to pray for those who are brought to my attention, and to prepare for the unpredictable and sometimes tumultuous waves of interactions of nearly a thousand people—other faculty and students—among whom I will spend the rest of my work day. Actually this is my day job. My work is quite different, in that it encompasses far more.

*Which is worth more, a crowd of thousands or
your own solitude?*

A little while alone in a room

Will prove more valuable than anything else

That could ever be given you.

Rumi (translated by Coleman Barks)

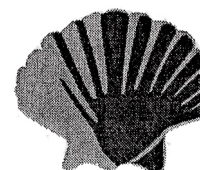
It seems to me that we are called, not to look for perfection, but to create it, with all the resources at our disposal. Some people are awake, searching, asking questions. I must be ready when they cross my path. My love for the One requires it of me. The others will come in their own good time. How do I prepare myself?

For me, solitude is imperative. Two guideposts that I have learned to follow are events or activities in which sacred time exists—when the clock hands go 'round without my being aware of them—and secondly, when my energy arises from within and flows. Both of these occur simultaneously when I write. Also I have found that my battery is recharged by watching my body as it learns to sail a small boat, design a house, or sculpt, or when I listen to my hands as they give the gift of a massage. I once gave a three-hour massage, and another time, five hours, without being aware of clock time.

When my energy flows, I am renewed by the holy event, the passion of fire from within. For me, this begins with solitude, but is only fully realized in outer action. Jung considered that individuation is not possible without interaction between people. Yet an outer-centered life dulls me so that I forget who I really am. So, for me, the yin-yang, inner-outer, listening-doing combination leads to balance—just as the oak trees around the house-I-used-to-have slept during the winter, but in summer shaded and cooled the house with their green leaves.

With my large workday family I cannot predict all the problems or tasks. Without the solitude that begins my day I would not be able to keep my feathers ready to fly. With the quiet arising from deep within my being, a ruffled feather here and there is soon put right and can fly with joy and purpose—sort of like remaining gathered at a dead run. Is that what the cross was like—that unforgettable example of Love to the nth degree?

♪ *James Baker is a member of Downers Grove Friends Meeting and looks forward to what is next.*



IN THE CAVE WITH HIM ALONE

by Heidi Blocher

I have felt drawn to the practice of solitude from childhood on. In the last ten years, after I found Friends, this practice has become a conscious spiritual discipline for me.

Besides daily periods of solitude, there are times when I feel God calling me to come alone into a cave with Him so He can speak to me. These periods can be long. They are times when I keep more solitude than at others and am outwardly less active. In these weeks or months—often winters—God wants to teach me about the next step I must take in my walk toward Him. I walk directly out of the innermost part of myself, usually in the form of inward experience, though there might be words. I find this direct teaching in solitude, silence, and even darkness with God is ultimately convincing guidance for me. In retrospect, these times reveal themselves as periods of intense growth. There is a sense that God has secretly lifted me over a threshold.

These times in the cave tend to be prepared by a period of indirect teaching by God through reading, listening to others, involvement in my faith community, and simply everyday living. They are usually followed by an experience of new light, and exit from the cave, a rise of energy, and a fresh spurt of activity in and for the Kingdom.

Going into the cave can mean, or can appear to mean, a sacrifice. Often I find I am being withdrawn from an activity precisely when it has begun to look fruitful and rewarding. I can feel that my efforts will come to naught by this withdrawal. I can grumble against God for this. Over time, however, I am learning that the timing of the cave period is no coincidence. God chooses it precisely. The sacrifice is an essential aspect. What looks like a diminishment may in fact be a preservation from harm, a bridling of my own horses. Whenever God calls me into the cave to be alone just with Him, it can only be counted as an honor and a great favor. In this trust may I cheerfully comply.

♪ Heidi Blocher has been an attendee at Sandwich Monthly Meeting, MA, since 1991 and is now in Switzerland Yearly Meeting.



Mystics report that every bit of the world radiates from one center—every cricket, every grain of dust, every dream, every image, everything under the sun or beyond the sun, all art and myth and wildness. If they are right, then we have no more important task than to seek that center.

Scott Russell Sanders

EPIPHANY IN INDIAN COUNTRY

By Thomas C. Battey

“Last night encamped entirely alone on Beaver Creek, about fifteen miles from the agency. After lariatting out my mules, and partaking of some supper, I retired to my ambulance to sleep. [Battey was ill and could no longer ride horseback.]

Notwithstanding my lonely situation, being, in all probability, many miles from any other human being, I was favored to feel sensible of the Divine Presence, before betaking myself to sleep, and thankfulness was the clothing of my spirit, not only for the many preservations I have experienced in my wanderings in this wild and solitary land, but that I am not left comfortless in the wilderness.

After a very comfortable night's repose, I started early, and arrived at the Agency about ten o'clock, A.M. On the road this morning, access was obtained to the ever-wakeful ear of the Great Master, who I desire to serve, far beyond what it is often my lot to experience; and I was enabled to pour forth the petitions of my heart in words, not only on my own behalf, but on behalf of my most precious family, as they individually came before the view of my mind, while the people among whom I live were also remembered, in a manner surprising even to myself. Tears of gratitude and love flowed unrestrained. This season of favor was succeeded by a comfortable calmness, in which my peace flowed as a river.

‘Praise the Lord, O my soul! And all that is within me, bless His holy name.’”

From the journal of *Thomas C. Battey*. *The Life and Adventures of a Quaker Among the Indians*, University of Oklahoma Press, p. 273



LETTERS

What Canst Thou Say? is my favorite newsletter because its articles are born out of heartfelt personal experience. It has helped me express where I am in my spiritual journey, and let me hear from those who were at similar points as well as those far more advanced.

Thank you so much for the work you do. I live in a rural area far from any meetings and am often homebound due to severe illness.

I am looking for a spiritual friend who might like to be a pen pal.

Linda Theresa
1532 West 7th Street
Alamosa, CA 81101
(719) 587-5579

RESOURCES

The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality, by Belden C. Lane, Oxford University Press, 1998.

A rare blend of beautifully written spiritual stories that touch the heart combined with fine scholarship by a teacher of theology who loves the desert while alone and also in community.

Seven Days of Solitude: A Guidebook for Personal Retreat by Brother Ramon, SSF, Liguori Publications, 1991, 2000.

Written by an English monk living as a hermit, this little book is for Christians who want to follow a structured pattern during their solitary retreat. Scripture, prayers, meditations, exercises and even recipes are suggested for each day.

Solitude: A Return to the Self by Anthony Storr, The Free Press division of Macmillan, 1988

Storr explores the effects of solitude from childhood on in a thorough and perceptive way that shows both positive and negative outcomes. He draws upon fiction, poetry and psychiatric analysis. The sections on creativity are particularly interesting.

Precious Solitude: Finding Peace and Serenity in a Hectic World by Ruth Fishel, Adams Media, 1999

This small book is like a friendly conversation about all the many ways to enjoy and benefit from solitude. The author, a therapist and workshop leader, has many gentle insights, good quotes, and stories.

A Seven Day Journey with Thomas Merton, by Esther de Waal, with Photographs by Thomas Merton, Foreword by Henri Nouwen, Servant Publications, 1992.

How to have an 8-day retreat based on the author's responses to Thomas Merton's works and incorporating his words and photographs. Good for those who want structure and guidance for their time of solitude.

Centering Prayer: Renewing an Ancient Christian Prayer Form, by M. Basil Pennington, O.C.S.O., Doubleday, 1986.

A guide to deepening one's prayer experience and one's life, written by a contemporary monk who takes great joy in God. This book articulates many aspects of the ultimately inexpressible – the joy of simply BEING in the presence of God.

"A true mystic believes that all men have, as he himself is conscious of having, an inward life, into which as into a secret chamber, he can retreat at will. In this inner chamber he finds a refuge from the ever-changing aspects of outward existence; from the multitude of cares and pleasures and agitation which belong to the life of the senses and the affections; from human judgments; from all change, and chance, and turmoil, and distraction.

He finds there, first repose, then an awful guidance; a light which burns and purifies; a voice which subdues; he finds himself in the presence of his God."

♪ Caroline Stephen, *Quaker Spirituality*, 1994, page 248.



May is the month when the majority of What Canst Thou Say? subscribers receive their renewal notices. Amy Perry and Lieselotte Heil, our subscription volunteers, would be greatly pleased if readers whose renewal forms are enclosed with this issue would resubscribe promptly. Your cooperation will save the work of sending out reminders. You may want to consider giving someone a gift subscription, or you may want to send us the name of a person who is likely to appreciate a sample copy of WCTS.

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UPCOMING ISSUES

August 2001: FORGIVING

EDITOR: MARIELLEN O. GILPIN

Sometimes forgiveness happens in an instant, a moment of grace. Sometimes it is a process, where the old angers boil up time and again, and we choose again and again to let them go. Sometimes the person we need most to forgive is ourselves. However it happens, it's all God's work. Tell us your stories of forgiving, and what you have learned about a forgiving God.

DEADLINE: JUNE 1.

November 2001: KUNDALINI ENERGY

EDITOR: KATHY TAPP

Kundalini is the Sanskrit word for the spiritual power within each person. According to yogic science, this power lies dormant at the base of the spine. When activated, it rises through the chakras to the crown. People undergoing a Kundalini rising often experience energy surges in the body, inner light, inner sounds, heat, and mystical and psychic phenomena. Some people consider the word "Kundalini" as another name for the Holy Spirit. Have you had experiences which you feel are caused by this energy? What has helped you in dealing with these experiences? How have you integrated them into your spiritual paradigm?

DEADLINE: SEPTEMBER 1.

February 2002: SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE AND THE OUTWARD LIFE

EDITOR: PAT MCBEE

William Penn wrote of early Friends "They were changed men [sic] themselves before they went out to change others." Jesus spoke of the spirit being willing but the flesh weak. How has your spiritual experience changed you and the way you live your outward life? Have you found ways of gracefully integrating the inward and the outward or do you have difficulty bridging between the two? How do you work to deepen your ability to live a life of spiritual integrity?

DEADLINE: DECEMBER 1.

Please write for WCTS

What Canst Thou Say is a worship sharing group in print. Its richness comes from the generous sharing of readers with one another. Articles of 350 to 1500 words can be submitted by e-mail to pmcbee@juno.com. By submitting electronically you save your volunteer editors the work of retyping your manuscript. If you cannot send by e-mail please send a disk, in Microsoft Word or generic text format, or your paper copy to Patricia McBee, 3208 Hamilton St., Philadelphia, PA 19104. Thanks!

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