



# ***Raven's Bread***

## ***Food for Those in Solitude***

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### ***Vol: 4 No: 4 November 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:

***Raven's Bread***  
***18065 Hwy 209***  
***Hot Springs, NC 28743***

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](mailto: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: Judith Hahn, Grand Rapids, MI***

Many years ago I had the opportunity to read *The Wisdom of Insecurity* by Alan Watts. Since then the book has remained on my shelf, but the title still haunts me. With time I have learned that a paradox exists in the lived experiences of security and insecurity. Both attract me and both frighten me. I desire to feel secure and I long to know the meaning of really letting go.

Security is necessary for newborn infants. Children learn to trust that life is reliable, that others do care. Not even the best childhoods are perfect so as we grow some of us have more resiliency than others in risking mature living.

But the paradox is that I mature into adulthood only to discover God calling me to let go of the life on which I have learned to depend! As a solitary, I am called to live this paradox, to grow into the true freedom of the Children of God. The call to trust emerges out of the mysterious recesses of desert emptiness – a call to have faith and confidence in life and the God who dwells in all the experiences of life.

Solitude, I have discovered, is the place where I face head-on my resistance to the paradox. Here I meet all the insecurities that prevent me from growing into God and the securities that hold me back from the embrace of Love. Looking around, I see my security needs: financial, material, physical, mental, and spiritual ones.

I desire the security of knowing that there is a God who is deeply invested in my life and in all of creation. I desire to trust that there is a God who is there even in quiet nothingness. In solitude I discover over and over that my finances are not secure; that all the "things" I have around me do not satisfy nor ever seem to be enough; that my health can change at any moment; and that my experience of God is one of never knowing for sure what this Divine Presence is or how it will be revealed.

Others may experience the paradox of security/insecurity in other forms. For me, it is fear and the trap for me is to hold on to what I have. Fear of? My list is endless: fear of not having enough, of being needy, of being insufficient, not good enough, and of course the big one: what will happen when I can no longer support myself? Intertwined is the terror of total aloneness and emptiness that I see on the horizon at times. All these fears can be paralyzing.

The hermit's wisdom is that God will provide, as we grow in fidelity to this way of discipleship. I have known this in bits and pieces. I long for the day when all these loose ends will be linked together in a trusting awareness that God alone is my security. I long for the day when I will truly believe that, when I feel most insecure, God will be there to give me everything – but nothing to hold on to. My flailing around may stop even if my fear and anxiety continue to surface. Yes, I will continue to provide for my needs. The difference is a growing awareness that my inner solitude and my external solitude are "secured" in God's providential care.

## **A Word from Still Wood**

I glance through the glass doors opening onto our deck and stop in my tracks. Something wondrous is happening to the mountain slope across the valley. It is glowing in the morning sun with gem-rich colors that assail my heart. Set against the deep blue of an October sky, the mountain flames in silent beauty.

How did this happen? Only last week it was clothed in restful green. Now it blazes with crimson, rose, orange and gold.

This slope was visited by killing frosts a few days ago. During a dark night, numbing cold froze the sap that nourished its verdant life. And that life died.... but only to reveal the glorious colors obscured by the busy green cells of summer. Life continues but in a new guise. Had the mountain somehow resisted the chill winds; had it clung to the security it found in its green identity....would this breath-taking loveliness now be revealed?

The topic of *Security* proposed for this issue of **RB** evokes this same mystery of life revealed in seeming death. As editors we have been stopped in our tracks, overcome, and humbled by the reflections submitted by our readers.

Our contributors have described how letting go, letting God be God amidst their fears, changes, challenges and surprises have enabled them to find true security. We are happy to share with you the many colors of trust displayed in their reflections.

Since the last issue of **RB**, we have changed (not our colors) but our mailing address! The P.O. Box is gone. Our new address is:

18065 Hwy 209, Hot Springs, NC 28743

We would appreciate your noting this so that your surface mail will reach us promptly.

Our special thanks to all of you who have renewed your subscriptions - many with that generous extra tucked in. We warmly welcome as well our new subscribers who bring RB's mailing list to nearly 600, tripling the number of its first issue in July 1997. Raven prays that we can all face "autumn storms" calmly and daily discover the beauty revealed when the tatters we had clothed ourselves in are torn away and we find ourselves adorned in the "glory rags" of God!

May the winds of winter kiss you gently and lead you within where the Beautiful Child is born anew and all your own beauty is illumined like the autumn hills on a golden October morn.

**With Grateful love,  
Karen & Paul**

## *zzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz***Sounding Solitude***zzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz*

*By Veronica Gordon-Smith, Edinburgh,  
Scotland*

The issue of security occasionally grips me with panic - financial security, in particular. Then I remember what my former Mistress of Novices said to me when I last visited her in Dublin: "God has looked after you very well." And I look back on my life and think, "Yes, whenever I have 'really' needed something - money to live on, a place to stay, help of some kind (especially spiritual help) it has always come. All I have to do is wait and trust. Remembering this, my equanimity slowly returns, and with it my sense of "cosmic confidence in Reality," as Raimon Panikkar puts it. God does look after me very well.

Physical safety is a more complex issue to resolve. I have lived anonymously as a solitary in a tenement for fourteen years. It has felt very important to be a witness to neighborliness, as far as possible. I have been looking out for a schizophrenic friend nearby for a number of years. Now I have a neighbor upstairs with a severe mental condition who frequently hammers on my door. And add to that a violent man with a Rottweiler who has slashed my tires.....It may be time to release myself from my commitment to stability in this neighborhood community and to find an apartment which can be more literally and peacefully a hermitage. In the process, I have to trust that God will not let me be tested beyond my strength, as St. Paul says, and he certainly knew what insecurity was!

Rural living is not necessarily safer. Four years ago I spent a winter in a remote cottage in my home glen in the Scottish Highlands. As the months passed, the three principal difficulties I encountered were health, expense, and safety. In traditional Scottish culture, hospitality is of primary importance. Discretion in this matter is vital and dictates how you express that hospitality.

I made no offers of hospitality but gradually I was being regularly visited by a number of single men, bachelors and widowers, all of whom I knew or knew of. They ranged in age from 32 to 86 years old! One situation culminated in a

distressing experience which took me months to get over. I was startled by what was happening and thought and prayed deeply about it. My boundaries were clear, but I knew I was treading a fine line between courtesy and finding myself in difficulties. I was also feeling a deep sense of psycho-spiritual threat.

As a solitary I was living alone in the greatest quiet I could find, which at first sight a rural situation appeared to offer. But I was also inserting myself into a community, albeit a scattered one, and one where I was known. In remote glens these communities, while initially welcoming, can be found to have very traditional views of women, including the belief that women should not be alone; they should be married. But I was contentedly, and by my own choice, living alone. This not only offended traditional custom but was probably believed to be impossible. I must be lonely, therefore I needed company. And my way of life disturbed not just the men, but the women. I was asked often in tones of some anxiety by female friends if I was all right remaining unmarried. I realized also that had I been wearing a religious habit (as I did 20 years ago), the same questions would eventually have been asked, and probably the same overtures made. I was dealing not just with the challenge of my own solitude and spirituality but with fundamental issues in human relationships within the larger community. It was far more complex and multi-layered than I had anticipated.

I have reflected on Barbara Erakko-Taylor's words on "obstacles" in *Raven's Bread* (August 1999): *"The solitary has a unique problem and dilemma to resolve before authentic solitude finally emerges. Only in being 'with' each of these so-called obstacles can one achieve the deeper mystery of solitude. I have come to the conclusion that my solitude is growing even as I travel in ways I cannot understand."*

Is the only answer for women solitaires to live together in sketes or other forms of community? I don't know. It seems contradictory. There appears to be no fixed solution, only the path. It seems that the existence of the solitary poses uncomfortable questions, not just for oneself but for others, too.

The task, whatever form of insecurity we face, is to keep one's inner balance, and find that deeper place in which to take refuge. Julian of Norwich was probably not referring to physical safety but her words are comforting in this context: *"If there be anywhere on earth a lover of God who is always kept safe, I know nothing of it, for it was not shown to me. But this was shown: that in falling and rising again we are always kept in that same precious love."*

## zzzz **Faces of Love and Faith - Security / Insecurity**zzzz

*by Judith, a Would-be Hermit*

*"Our sister is little and she has no breasts as yet..." (Song of Songs 8:8)*

My little sister of long-standing, a relationship arranged by the Big Sister Association when she 11 years old, grew up in the insecurity and poverty of a "fatherless" home in the projects. One of seven children, which included three mentally retarded brothers, she needed my quietness to balance a poor relationship with her overworked, loud, and harsh mother. Now at age 40 she has the security of a good husband who cares for her and her two children lovingly. Still, she calls me sometimes, asking for a big sister to mother her.

After years of earning my own way in the capitalistic system of the USA and

Europe, I recently entered a world of poverty and insecurity similar to that which my little sister knew most of her life. Emptying myself and becoming one of the poor, economically speaking at least, my path crossed that of my little sister's. Suddenly a whole new dynamic opened up in our relationship. I am preparing for the eremitic life, and she directs me in the use of food stamps! We have become equals!

But something else has happened. A recent spiritual director noted that I still exhibit the lack of self-confidence with which I was labeled by my nursing instructors back in the '60's – a term I still don't understand. This lack of self-confidence has never troubled me, except that no one ever explained it to me. I was given the grace of courage to move through fear so often that I didn't feel any form of personal insecurity.

Learning to turn away from anxiety about unpaid bills is quite another matter, however, just as giving up a high degree of independence so as to depend on God entirely. The Beloved is very patient as He teaches me to depend on Him and let Him be my security in all matters. He sees that the necessary hours of work, the money, food and other needs are readily provided. He is attentive to every detail. Even though He has guided me throughout my life, now He is proving Himself to be an even more attentive, personally present Spouse.

My little sister has wanted nothing to do with organized religion most of her life. And even though I always believed in her and stood by her in whatever mess she got into, I never considered it necessary to evangelize her. Recently, in the hour of my financial need, she was listening between the lines of our phone call and didn't hesitate to ask if I needed money. At the end of the call she repeated firmly that she was good for a loan; I just had to say so.

Later, after I did ask for the loan, she began to open and share things from her own soul. She continues to open herself to what she doesn't yet call GOD. To me it is a miracle, that my acceptance of financial insecurity has enabled her to begin seeking security in a Higher Being.

This potential hermit doesn't exist alone in the midst of American-security-capitalism. She has a little sister with no breasts who must be enabled to seek the Bridegroom and receive him herself. My little sister has sought security in money, horoscopes, trust in our relationship, her children, a good husband, a house. She will find her ultimate security in a Loving Father with our continued prayers. I will find added security in Our Loving Lord by trusting that He will supply my every need. Furthermore, I feel no need of *self-confidence* as I find that He is my real confidence.

**There where clinging to things ends, there God begins to be.**  
Meister Eckhart

## zzzzzzzzzzzz**Must Hermits Work?**zzzzzzzzzzzz

*by Kenneth C. Russell*

*(Reprinted by permission from Review for Religious, March-April, 2000)*

Must hermits work to earn their living? Must they leave aside their regime of

silence and prayer to earn money, even though this is a Catch-22 situation, with solitude calling them away from society and work drawing them back into it? By taking a job, manufacturing a product, or providing a service, they trouble themselves with any number of people so as to have enough income to get away from people and indulge their own hermit's desire to be alone and untroubled.

Are they not then better off depending on some form of fixed income, on the largess of the religious congregations to which they may belong, or on the charity of the faithful? It would seem so. But is this kind of dependence legitimate? What does the history of the eremitical life in the Western church say about this? How do the principal texts on the solitary life deal with the economic, psychological, and spiritual aspects of work? What features remain constant in the tradition? What shifts take place?

In this brief overview, which makes no claim to be complete, we begin with the teachings of the pioneers in the Egyptian desert as those are recorded in the alphabetical collection of Sayings of the Desert Fathers and in John Cassian's Institutions and Conferences. We then turn our attention to a few representative medieval texts, primarily from the 12th century, a period marked by a widespread revival of the eremitical life.

### **The Sayings of the Desert Fathers**

Although the classical picture of the hermits in the Egyptian desert as hardscrabble peasants used to a tough life has been challenged of late, it seems clear that, whatever the truth about their social status and educational background, they earned their keep by the work of their hands. The Sayings tell us that the solitaries plaited ropes, made baskets and hired themselves out as laborers to bring in the harvest. At least one monk strung necklaces of small dried peas to pay for his food. We are told that Abba Serinus spend his time harvesting, sewing and weaving.

The monks worked because they had to. They did not share the conviction of the excessively spiritual groups of the time that considered work to be below the dignity of those called to perpetual prayer. Several stories seem to satirize the "angelic" attitude of these Messalians, as they were called. The point is driven home in the story of a monk who, while visiting a small eremitical community, sees the brothers working hard and cautions their leader, Abba Silvanus, not to seek "the food which perishes." Abba Silvanus allows him to spend the day reading, but does not summon him to dinner. When the hungry monk asks why he was not called, the elder answers: "Because you are a spiritual man and do not need that kind of food. We, being carnal, want to eat, and that is why we work." In these words of practical economy, it is obvious that work not only feeds the monk but keeps him grounded in the reality of the world and human nature.

The Egyptian hermits lived apart from society, but they were not disconnected from the larger world. A brother was advised by Abba Poemen to do some manual labor "so as to be able to give alms." This readiness "to work for charity's sake" also set the Egyptian monks apart from the Messalians or Euchites, who regarded themselves as the most fitting recipients of any handouts.

But work that enables a monk to support himself and make a contribution to the well-being of others can also prove a distraction. What is supposed to support the spiritual life can become an end in itself. It can assume an importance it does not deserve. This is surely why Abba Silvanus threatens to leave his little community when his disciples and some other brothers move the fence to enlarge the garden. This story also implies that at some point work becomes a guarantee of security, which challenges the hermit's dependence on divine providence.

**(To be Continued)**

**Topic for February 2001 Issue:  
How does one discern a call to Solitude;  
to an eremitical way of life?  
Deadline: January 3, 2001**

## **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 (starting April 1, 2001) 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**

**The Hermits and Anchorites of England** by R M Clay. *A new edition of a classic that has never been rivaled as a study of early eremitical life in England. Includes the original text, appendices and index plus fifty-four illustrations.* Paper, 270pp. in two volumes, spiral bound. £16.00 Available through Fellowship of Solitaries, Coed Glas, Talgarth Road, Bronllys, Brecon, Powys, LD3 0HN, Wales, UK (*Make checks payable to Fellowship of Solitaries. Ask Bank for check in sterling, drawn on a UK Bank*).

**Water in the Desert** by Benedict Baker. *Wisdom from the Solitaries of Egypt, translation from the Vitae Patrum with introduction.* Paper, 20pp. £1.50 Available through Fellowship of Solitaries, Coed Glas, Talgarth Road, Bronllys, Brecon, Powys, LD3 0HN, Wales, UK (*Make checks payable to Fellowship of Solitaries. Ask Bank for check in sterling, drawn on a UK Bank*).

**"Un-jobbing"** by Michael Fogler. *The "adult liberation handbook," a thought provoking reflection on personal economics.* \$12.00 plus \$2.00 S/H Available from Free Choice Press, P.O. Box 1027, Lexington, KY 40588-1027

**Camaldoli, A Journey into its History & Spirituality** by Lino Vigilucci. Translated by Peter-Damian Belisle. *The first English-language survey of this great order and its key figures.* Paper 180 pp. Available from Source Books, P.O.Box 794, Trabuco Canyon, CA 92678

**La Nostalgie Du Désert, L'Idéal érémitique en Castille au Siècle d'Or** by Alain Saint-Saëns. *Well documented study of the history of the eremitical movement.* Hardcover 283 pp. Order from The Edwin Mellen Press, P.O.Box 450, Lewiston, NY 14092



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