

Excerpts from Raven's Bread
November 2008

Thoughts on Solitude

"I shall certainly have solitude. Where? Here or there makes no difference. Somewhere, nowhere, beyond all "where". Solitude outside geography or in it. No matter." Thomas Merton

Going apart in silence and solitude, whether full-time or in a rhythm of withdrawal and return, is integral to many religious traditions and spiritualities. Hinduism's forest dwellers, Islam's Sufi mystics, Judaism's kabbalists, Christian monks and hermits, each focuses on the necessity of a contemplative-mystical life of simplicity, detachment, and selfless love. Each group has its models, gurus, saints, whose lives exemplify different rhythms of silence and solitude. In this reflection, we look at one such model, Thomas Merton, who, like us, had "feet of clay", yet followed his deep call in a conversion journey to in-depth silence, solitude and contemplation.

Fortieth Anniversary. December 10, 2008 marks the fortieth anniversary of the death of Thomas Merton. A renaissance man, world traveler, lover of literature, poetry, music, languages, he became a Catholic in 1938 and then joined the Cistercian monastery (Trappists) December 10, 1941. Merton lived as a priest-monk at Gethsemani, Kentucky, paradoxically deepening his inward journey of silence and solitude, becoming a mystic, spiritual leader, pacifist, prophet, as he became a more prolific writer, poet, scholar, theologian, photographer, teacher, and political activist.

By nature, garrulous and loquacious, Merton was not your stereotypical monk. With his autobiography, *Seven Storey Mountain*, published a short time after he entered the Trappists, Merton became known worldwide as a model and mentor for countless people searching for "the real" in life. Twenty-seven years to the day he entered Gethsemani, Thomas Merton died of accidental electrocution in Bangkok, Thailand. He was one of the seminal speakers at a meeting of east and west monks, sisters, abbots, all searching for common ground in their common search for the mystery of God.

Silence. When Merton entered the Trappist monastery, he was well aware of its silent life-style. He was also aware of his gift, desire, even need, to communicate, yet he resolved to become a silent monk. Silence, at this juncture in his life was an either/or dynamic; silence and speaking (writing) were dualistic opposites. The lived reality of this exterior silence was demanding on most of the monks and, it would seem, particularly on Merton. Even the Trappist sign language, used for purposes of necessity and charity, was creatively used and expanded by Merton to the point that stories were told about his being the most un-silent monk in the monastery!

Gradually Merton saw the need and necessity of this exterior silence as the disciplinary practice of refraining from unnecessary speech in order to foster patience, equanimity, charity and interiority. It became the initial step to interior silence, the silencing of one's heart for that "all encompassing silence of a mystical experience..., an experience that is ineffable..." (John Teahan in *The Message of Thomas Merton*, 1981, p.34). Merton's daily contemplation contributed to the maturation of his thought on both exterior and interior silence as a positive, creative source out of which emerged the word/Word as an expression of the truth within himself and God.

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A Word from Still Wood

Dawn-light is dim today, mysterious with dripping clouds drifting among the ridges, alternately hiding and revealing a strange phenomena – mountain slopes glowing and radiant! Flame-like leaves, flicker as they fall, carpeting amber avenues among dark tree trunks. What should be a dreary day is radiant with golden light. In place of doom and gloom, nature offers a vista of beauty, bright and rich. Each falling leaf lights our path and becomes a bright blanket protecting the seeds and roots settling in for their winter's rest. The darker the hour, the brighter the autumn colors shimmer. How we need this annual reminder – that what appears to be death and disaster is actually a means of nurture and renewal.

This year our planet is enduring a major crisis as world economies teeter on the verge of collapse, threatening lives and life-styles from New Zealand to Iceland. People who never heard of Wall Street are finding their lives affected. The interconnection of the global markets is analogous to the spiritual energies that unite all living beings in a diverse but single family. A hermitage on a mountainside in the Smokies is touched by prayer-power emanating from a cottage in Ireland and passes the dynamism on to a hut in Nigeria. Hermit pray-ers throughout the globe have a special responsibility at times like this. People everywhere need spiritual strengthening to deal with the chaos and suffering, deprivation and violence now dominating the world scene. We should not doubt the value of lives of prayer at this crucial hour. Spiritual energies are needed now more than ever.

This is a major theme in "***Consider the Ravens***," our long awaited book. The final chapter, "Horizons for Hermits" outlines what the hermit of the future will be like. The spiritual solitary lives the Beatitudes with intense focus. Hidden by their very ordinariness, hermits renew the faltering hope of the world. People everywhere are searching for new meaning to fill their empty lives; exploring alternative life-styles; seeking to learn more about silence, solitude and simplicity. These hallmarks of eremitism have been examined often in **RB**. Now the fruits of your reflections have been gathered into a single resource, available to nourish other seekers.

The many advance orders for "***Consider the Ravens***" are proof of the growing interest in eremitical life. We know you are eager to have "your" book in hand. So are we! Please be patient a bit longer. The printing of a quality work has required more time than we anticipated.

Meanwhile, we have developed a new website: www.ravensbreadministries.com ! You will be able to order on-line both "***Consider the Ravens***" and our earlier book, "***Where God Begins to Be, A Woman's Journey into Solitude***," as well as renew your donation to ***Raven's Bread***. We will continue to offer the newsletter in its abbreviated form, as well as provide the option to download the entire issue, a service which a number of you have requested. Of course, we will continue to send **RB** via surface mail to all who prefer to receive it as they now do. Resources for hermits will also be offered there as well as new opportunities for personal guidance.

Raven's Bread Ministries is able to provide new services because of your continuing support and encouragement. At this turning of the year, we celebrate new ways for ***Raven's Bread*** to serve the growing hermit community. Let this be our holiday gift to you this year, a gift which will reach even more lovers of solitude in every corner of the planet. Greetings to our first reader from China!

With Grateful Love,
Paul & Karen

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Hermits in the City

I live in an apartment building with 400 units, which means, I suppose, close to one thousand people, a staff of twenty and a twenty-four hour doorman. The building fronts on a main artery which serves as an access route to all areas north and so is well used by city buses, police cars, fire engines and ambulances, as well as a fairly steady stream of cars and motorcycles. From my window I can hear the whistle of the commuter train as it passes down near the river and when it's quiet, as it sometimes is late on a Saturday night, the sounds of adolescent laughter from the group of kids hanging out outside the pizza place across the street. When I step outside my apartment, there are neighbors waiting at the elevator, congregating in the lobby, bustling in and out of the building on their way to work or coming in from shopping. The mail room, with its four hundred individual mailboxes, each with its own little key, has a bulletin board on which are posted notices -- board meetings, available garage space, deaths in the community. And, strangely enough, this is a community -- the 21st century urban version of a small town, which is what you realize when there's a co-op board election or a maintenance increase.

I work a full-time job in the center of the city, which is an hour's commute each way. I have an ex-husband and a son and daughter-in-law, friends, business associates, and fellow choir members, but in my heart I am a hermit whose dearest wish is to remain alone, in communion with God.

So, when I close my front door every night, my apartment becomes my hermitage. It is here that I pray and talk to God and whatever angels and saints are around to join in. I make no appointments for the weekend because this time, time alone, is precious to me. I'll venture out for food and newspapers and Sunday Mass, but these two days are so dear that I refuse to compromise them away to see a movie or eat dinner out. Friends either accept this about me or not.

On my solitary weekends, I wake early, do my prayers, write, read, watch TV if I'm in the mood, then take a walk in the neighborhood with headphones on to keep out intruders. I will say hi to neighbors but rarely stop for a conversation. I need this time, this alone time, time with God, time to concentrate on Him, on us, on what we've accomplished during the week, on what needs to be done in the week upcoming. At sunset on Saturday and Sunday nights, I sit near my window and look out, thinking, dreaming, just enjoying the night -- and when it's quiet for a moment, when the traffic hum stops, I imagine myself deep in the woods where I'd love to be, but where, obviously, God has not got a room for me at this time. For some reason, He wants me here where I am, and so I remain a hermit in the city.

You can make a peaceful life, a life centered around God, anywhere you are, even in the midst of a city, even with all your frantic obligations and endless chores. You have to work at it, as I suppose you have to do in a different way deep in the country, but when you get it right, you find that the center is always the same no matter where you are: full of peace, joy, love.

Andrea Appel, Riverdale, NY

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It is three o'clock in the morning. The city sleeps. I hear it breathing, like a tormented giant, in a sleep at the same time heavy and fragile, interrupted by the noises in the night. A child is crying in the apartment opposite mine. A few cars pass by, too fast, their drivers making the wheels screech when turning the corner at the end of the street, ignoring the stop sign. Far off, the shrill siren of an ambulance signals that somewhere, once again, a human drama is taking place ...

It is three o'clock in the morning. The city sleeps. I hear it breathing because I, as an urban hermit, am no longer sleeping. At this hour I am already "at work" - the work of prayer. Gently, lovingly, I let my mantra ("Jesus") assume the rhythm of my breath and, little by little, gather up the rhythm of the sleeping city.

Gently, lovingly, I breath the sacred Name on all the people in the city - and in the world - who will live situations of sin or of suffering during this night, and on all the people who will endure the consequences of such situations.

Soon, at the moment when the first rays of dawn will appear through the window of my chapel, I will also call the new day to enter into the breath of the mantra - because I have come to understand that, in the day as in the night, our whole life is a breath of God.

Maranatha, Come, Lord Jesus!

Pia Riedemann, Montreal, Quebec

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Book Notices and Recommendations

THE PATH OF DESCENT by Richard Rohr, OFM. *"What Richard Rohr calls 'the language of descent' is the basic theme of the Bible. Call it powerlessness, the bias from the bottom, the way of the cross or vulnerability, human beings have to be taught how to win by losing. Life itself is a series of necessary losses. Religion has tended to prefer the day of 'ascent', attainment that is much more to the liking of the human ego, though it always defeats us."* 2007. approx. 4 hrs. 4 CDs: \$35.00. 2 DVDs: \$25.00.
Order from: CAC, P.O. Box 12464, Albuquerque, NM 87195-2464 or www.cacradicalgrace.org

THE STREAM AND THE SAPPHIRE, Selected Poems on Religious Themes by Denise Levertov. *"This selection of religious poems fulfills the eternal mission of the true poet; to be a receptacle of Divine Grace and a sender of that grace to humanity."* 1997. Cloth. ISBN #0-8112-1353; paper. ISBN 0-8112-1354-4. \$10.95.
New Directions Books, New York

THE LIFE OF SHABKAR: The Autobiography of a Tibetan Yogi by Shabkar Tsogdruk Rangdrol.

A *Raven's Bread* reader recommends this autobiography of a Tibetan hermit (1781-1851) who concluded his life story by offering a concise list of guidelines for the life of a hermit. She writes: *"He was considered a great Hermit and a great Teacher. A sensitive, emotional man, he was very kind to all living creatures, living as a vegetarian and frequently singing songs with bees and crows. A great book for Tibetan Buddhists as well as for those who are interested in eremitical life."* Paper \$25.50 SUNY Series in Buddhist Studies. New York.