



Raven's Bread

Food for Those in Solitude

Vol: 2 No: 3 August 1998

Raven's Bread is a quarterly newsletter for hermits and those interested in the eremitical life. This newsletter affirms this life style as a valid means of living in deeper fidelity to God and in spiritual union with the whole human race. ***Raven's Bread*** is a collaborative effort and thus depends on the shared reflections, stories, news, notices, letters, and information from hermits themselves. The ***Raven's Bread*** Web page is an abbreviated version of our full newsletter, which also includes a Bulletin Board and Reader Forum.

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

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

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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 on Solitude

One channel through which we learn more about God and ourselves is solitude. In the lives of pilgrims exploring the vast realm of the spiritual, solitude is a very important resource for development. However, our North American culture is not supportive of solitude. People may be made to feel guilty if they spend or enjoy time alone. They are called loners, antisocial, or are said to be strange.

But when there is no solitude in our daily lives, there is no time to examine deeply, acknowledge and accept ourselves. Saints and sages emphasize the vast importance of solitude. When we are alone, without distraction and with God's help, we can face who, what and why we are. Self-knowledge accompanies our journey into God. Self-knowledge requires solitude.

Spending a few weeks or months in solitude is only for the spiritually mature who sincerely seek the truth of God. Long periods of solitude are not for the naïve enthusiast, spiritual neophyte or neurotic zealot. Solitude used to deepen spirituality differs from getting away because one is tired of people, is seeking self-centered pursuits or is in need of neurotic isolation.

The revelations and discoveries found in solitude can be unexpected or even unimaginable. In solitude we are least alone. We pray for others and we who pray for others become convinced of our own need for reform. We see our own deep need for conversion and learn how to repent. Long solitude is a dear teacher: it scrapes us raw with the file of self-knowledge.

We find it takes time to settle down to a life that has no deadlines, tight schedules or things that must be done. We are frightened by the thought of having nothing to do. Romantic imaginings or fanciful mystical revelations are blown apart. We stand in a wasteland. Devotional thoughts that used to bring our hearts and minds to God no longer seem to work. Preoccupation about what God will or will not do for us vanishes like the morning mist in the midday sun.

Solitude teaches the great lesson of giving ourselves to God at the beginning of each day. By so doing we are less concerned about disruptive or delightful events in our day nor about tomorrow or yesterday. God will carry us through all as a loving father carries his child. In retrospect we can see everything as a blessing. Anything can expend our capacity to be filled with Christ's love. Anything can be a grace.

Our initial encounters with solitude focus on ways to improve our spiritual life. Later, we focus on who it is we are

seeking, knowing we can never completely find Him. Our long solitude is shrouded in mystery.

We face the world, fully present to it, but not of it. As pilgrims we pass through life with no lasting home. All things are passing. Everything was made by God. All He made is good. Our renewed vision focuses on the good and brings it to the fore. Goodness fuses the sacred and the secular. In the solitude at the depth of our being we find that everything finite is a stepping stone and reminder of the infinite.

By: Carolyn Humphreys, OCDS, Paramount, CA

(Excerpted with permission from Carmelite Digest)

A Word

From

Still Wood

"It was raining in the Smokies." So begins one of the best books written about these mountains, their history and their people. Anyone familiar with this area of northwestern North Carolina resonates with this opener. Today, as I compose this *"Word from Still Wood"*, the mountains across the valley are moving mysteriously in and out of clouds and mist. A light rain glistens on the lush greenery of high summer. And it is good..even when it interferes with my plans.

One of the big lessons of solitude is learning to live now with what *is*, not waiting until events or weather meet my needs or expectations. Rain reminds me to play because it so often causes me to revise my rigid plans and schedules. Today I will have to wait until the flowers are blown dry before I can spray them for summer insects (*as I had planned.*) Perhaps this rain is a gentle reminder to simply look at the flowers and rejoice in their beauty and wonder.

Paul and I planted many, many seeds and bulbs but not all of them sprouted. Rather than lament what did not grow, I can choose to be surprised by what has ö which is how I see the spirit of play transforming my drivenness into joy.

We were surprised by how few *Raven's Bread* readers responded to our topic for this issue: the indispensability of play in a balanced life of solitude. This compares interestingly with the veritable flood of responses to the topic of work. Perhaps even hermits are afflicted with the cultural bias of our age that values work over play? Is it easier to view work as an expression of our prayer than play and relaxation? Why so?

We are delighted with the contributions that fill our pages this issue: a reflection on the value of solitude; a "first" in what we hope will be a series on American Desert Mothers; and a fascinating essay that asks us to re-examine our image of hermit in the context of modern life.

The topic for our November issue is: **Hermits as Advent Persons**. Who are Advent people but those with great expectations; who are excited by God's nearness; who know how to play and who embrace their littleness in the hope of being highways for the Great God coming among us again as a little child.

With Grateful love,

Karen

~~~~~*Sounding Solitude*~~~~~

As a professed hermit now living in British Columbia, I experience keenly the difficulties of the craft as it has come to be practiced in the conditions of modern life. Gone are the days of the near-mythical reclusion, when the Mass for the Dead would be read at the profession ceremony and the hermit might then disappear into a solitary cave or desert to receive his or her daily bread entirely from the hand of God. Virtually every hermit I know struggles hard with the question of *balance*: how to walk the tightrope between solitude and the need to earn enough money to keep the operation afloat.

Even the monastery enclosure, the traditional approach route to hermit reclusion, offers no sure bets. My hermit teacher in the Snowmass, CO Trappist Monastery, Br. Raphael Robin, "Rafe" as he was usually known, was on call to tend the monastery heating and electrical systems and on more than one occasion was roused out of a hermit's solitude by a broken down boiler or frozen water line.

What was fascinating to me about Raphael, however, was that he sometimes 'chose' to emerge. When all systems were still cranking along satisfactorily and there was no obvious external reason to come down the hill from his sequestered little cabin, he would deliberately choose to bring himself down - to work on one of his old snowmobiles, sometimes to visit with friends and neighbors, and occasionally even to take in a movie. "For a hermit," said Abbot Joseph Boyle, addressing the packed crowd at Rafe's funeral Mass on December 15, 1995, "he sure had a lot of friends."

Some people thought Raphael wasn't a true hermit - a position that he himself agreed with completely. And yet, I have never met anyone more serious about his solitude and more uncompromisingly dedicated to the path of spiritual transformation. "Pure becoming" as he called it, was for him what life in Christ was all about, and whether in solitude, under a broken-down machine, or sharing a conversation over coffee with a friend, he was never for an instant *not* entirely centered around that goal. During the two-and-a-half years I worked under him before his death he taught me a style of hermiting I want to unpackage a bit in this (and following) articles - partly because I sense it emerged from a coherent vision deep within him, and partly because his vision is a useful one, even a prophetic one. For those who may recognize their own faces in his mirror, it gives a whole new latitude to pursue the hermit path *embracing* rather than fighting the conditions of modern life.

Rafe, I believe, was a *dervish*. The term is Sufi. It doesn't exist in western Christendom, where one must choose the fork in the road between "cenobitic" or "eremitical" expressions of the religious life. Dervish is neither - or both. Some dervishes spend their lives mostly in craggy solitude. Others, more typically, emerge from their solitude to teach or take on a disciple, to pass on their heartfire to another living soul; some even marry and raise families. But under this variety of lifestyles and circumstances, there is something unmistakable that characterizes a dervish - an innermost essence that is always there, regardless of the outer expression.

What is this essence? It is really quite well captured in Rafe's own words: *pure becoming*. The term *dervish* literally means "threshold," and that picturesque description itself provides the crucial clue: the dervish calling has something to do with *the meeting of two worlds*. For the hermit, reclusion is the bottom line: he or she leaves the world and lives apart as a sign of renunciation and poverty of spirit. The dervish is drawn, almost in spite of himself, back and forth across that threshold. He or she lives at the boundary between pure solitude and the need to spill back into the world, still pointing like a weathervane in the direction of that other. Try as one might, the tension won't collapse. The solitude drives one back into the world to communicate (not necessarily in words but in the quality of one's aliveness) some vestige of that divine intensity that aches for human expression.

From the outside it looks like an unsettled life, and in some ways it certainly is. Clearly this was so for Raphael, who was always frustrated - frustrated at not getting enough solitude and yet leaving even when he had it; frustrated that no matter how hard he tried, a more permanent and stable solitude always seemed to elude him. That tension is the essence of the dervish craft. And one finally sees that it is not going away. The ache, the unsettledness, is itself the crucible of "pure becoming." One will not resolve it, as Rafe finally came to accept, by finding a more remote hermitage, by perfecting one's rhythms, by settling the matter once and for all. The ache comes from God. It is the stigmata that all dervishes bear.

By: Rev. Cynthia Bourjeault, Salt Spring Island, British Columbia

An American Desert Mother

By

Judith Weaver, Paris, AR

Cecilia W. Wilms, hermit of Our Lady of the City Hermitage in Spokane, WA, died peacefully in her hermitage on May 13, 1998. A hermit friend who had seen to her care during the ten-month illness with cancer of the peritoneum was present with her and called the others involved to her bedside.

Cecilia was born in 1932 in Ghent, Belgium. She entered the Cistercian Abbey of Our Lady of Nazareth at Brecht in 1953, and helped found Redwoods Monastery in California in 1962. In 1968 she took a leave of absence for health reasons and in the continuing evolution of her contemplative vocation, discovered a solitary way to *"live my monastic commitment in the desert of the city in the service of God and the Church."* As Church law did not provide at this time for a public commitment to the hermit way of living, Cecilia received the Consecration of Virgins through the ministry of Bishop Bernard Topel of Spokane in 1974.

She chose to live in a poor neighborhood within walking distance of Gonzaga University where she was employed part-time. In recent years she worked for the University out of her hermitage, writing and collaborating closely with Fr. Joseph Conwell, SJ, her associate, friend and spiritual director. She was at times available to persons seeking guidance in prayer. Many scholastics of St. Michael's Institute, the Jesuit Institute of Philosophy and Letters, experienced the wisdom of Cecilia's spiritual mentoring.

Through the years, Cecilia published articles and excerpts from her journal in *Contemplative Review* and other publications that offer a richly textured picture of this contemporary hermit's deep spirituality. An excerpt from her journal reveals how she embraced the privations of her simple way of living in solidarity with the poor of the world. "Oct. 24, 1982. *You have brought me here to this new hermitage, you will watch over me and lead me through the approaching winter. Enable me to embrace with joy the hardships but especially the powerlessness of the poor that awaits me every day in coping with the warm water and heating system. Teach me wisdom, above all teach me mercy and compassion that I may live here in praise of your glory and for the life of the world!*"

In 1997 she wrote: *"If the hermit way of life means deeper solitude and silence, a withdrawal to the interior desert where God and evil meet, it also means a more profound communion with all one's brothers and sisters, a being present in prayer to the world's struggle for peace with justice, and total trust in God, the ever Faithful"*

one, who calls and leads the way."

Three days before her death, Cecilia asked to have the windows opened. Her caregiver removed the blankets from between the windowpane and the draperies (placed there for insulation.) Feeling the fresh air coming through the window with the removal of the first blanket, Cecilia remarked how wonderful it was. As the second blanket came down, the words and music of "*Arise my beloved, my beautiful one, come. Winter is past.*" welled up within the caregiver. Cecilia also heard the music. "You are singing," Cecilia said. Surprised, the caregiver said she wasn't. Then both wept. It was the song that had been sung at Cecilia's consecration and that she had asked to have sung at her funeral liturgy. Was a duet being played in their spirits simultaneously? Richard Rolle, English mystic, describes the phenomenon of music played in the heart by the Holy Spirit. Perhaps Cecilia experienced this grace near the end of her journey as prelude to heavenly joys awaiting her.

In many ways, Cecilia Wilms is a pioneer of American eremiticism, having lived for over thirty years as a solitary, renewing her struggle every day to validate her consecration: "*to constantly turn toward You and seek Your face, to live in an attitude of openness - in vulnerability and risk -- to growth and change, to the unpredictable demands of Your word.*" Those who knew her well say she did just that.

Question for November 1998 Issue:

Would you term hermits as Advent Persons? How can we be signs of hope and of God's coming into the world?

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

Deadline: October 5, 1998

BOOK NOTICES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Return to the Source. A new theological and spiritual journal which "breathes with both lungs," drawing from both Eastern and Western Christian traditions. The journal is published by the Maronite Monks of Holy Nativity Monastery in SD and Most Holy Trinity Monastery in Massachusetts. To receive the first (Fall 1998) issue write to: **Return to the Source**, Holy Nativity Monastery, P.O. Box 170, Piedmont, SD 57769-0170. This publication is sustained solely through donations. A \$10.00 donation is suggested for each copy

Meditations from the Wilderness by Charles A.E. Brandt. *This small book offers a collection of the best writings on nature, the environment and our spiritual connection to the earth coupled with Brandt's own striking black & white photographs.* HarperCollins Publishers Ltd. Toronto, 1997 110 pp. CDN \$14.00, US \$12.00

Daybreak Within - Living in a Sacred World by Rich Heffern. *With huge doses of humor and deep insight, Rich Heffern brings fun and reality into spirituality.* Forest of Peace Publishing, Inc. Leavenworth, KS 1998, Paper, 142 pp. \$11.95

Ponderings from the Precipice - Soulwork for a New Millennium by James Conlon. *Forty-eight short reflections designed as a companion for moments of meditation. Each reflection is followed by a soulwork section that offers concrete ways to explore the questions.* Forest of Peace Publishing, Inc. Leavenworth, KS 1998, Paper, 144 pp. \$11.95

Meditations on Silence, On Peace, On Joy, On Love by Sr. Wendy Beckett. *"These four books are wonderful!" says one of RB's readers.* Published by Dorling Kindersley, \$9.00 each or Media Play \$6.75

Sacred Reading: The Ancient Art of Lectio Divina by Michael Casey. *An engaging, readable style combined with a great deal of substance makes this a worthwhile book for all those who seek to deepen their encounter with the Lord.* Triumph Books, Ligouri, MO 1995, 151 pp. \$12.95

Holy Listening: The Art of Spiritual Direction by Margaret Guenther. *She writes about spiritual direction from her unique perspective as a woman, wife, mother, teacher and Episcopal priest - definitely a book for all those who feel called to the ministry of spiritual direction, as well as for those who are in direction.* Cowley Publications, Boston 1992 146pp.



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