

Raven's Bread

Food for Those in Solitude

Vol: 4 No: 1 February 2000

Raven's Bread is a quarterly newsletter for hermits and those interested in the eremitical life published Paul and Karen Fredette. This 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

P.O. Box 562

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: 103517.210 @ compuserve.com

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: Richard Simonelli, Boulder, CO

When all is said and done we don't know why a person has a hermit's calling. We might explain the call of the hermitage in a spiritual, or even in a psychological way, but finally we must trust the fundamental Mystery and just let the hermit be the hermit ö whether that person is someone else, or we ourselves.

This is a world of countless "things." It is a world of endless activities, relationships, involvement's and wonders ö both human-made and natural. In the spirit of a great renunciation, the hermit has chosen ö or perhaps "is called upon" is the better phrase ö to limit his or her involvement with the world. It is a *great* renunciation because it is made in order that the hermit may dwell in the silent Immensity in perhaps the only way available to him or her in this lifetime. We don't know precisely when the hermit has had to pass through such a narrow gate but he does. In walking through that gate she is responding to a sacred command issued by life itself.

On the other side of the hermetic gate is a narrow trail which eventually opens up to a space of such immensity that it connects to each and every one of those countless things that the hermit has left behind. This connection takes place in the unseen world of the spirit. These spiritual connective patterns are not the private property of the hermit alone. Through the hermit's sincere commitment, the spiritual connectedness that the hermit discovers touches all living beings. It is as though the gifts and strengths of the hermitage are written on the winds for all to see. They are available to all as a healing pattern that interconnects the whole world. This unseen pattern which emanates from every hermit is the hermit's ultimate expression of service to the world at large.

Does this unseen benevolent web really exist or is this just a romantic fantasy or a literary metaphor? Many of those who have learned to live in, and work with quality solitude, have intuited that the connective pattern is real. At some point a solitary contemplative may have the insight that even in solitude he or she touches others. For some of us only solitude hones and refines the gift of intuition to where things like this are suddenly *known* without a developmental process.

Hermits offer the 21st century a model of human decency, wholesomeness, and an interiority that we all so desperately need. Living in a low-key, low-tech way, the hermit's renunciation is good news for an over-stressed contemporary world. The first prerequisite for both individual spiritual healing and societal healing is an inwardly directed gaze. As a people, we have become outer-directed to an alarming degree. We have lost the ability to look inside for the spirituality and self-knowledge that can quench an awful thirst. But the interiority that is a gift of the hermitage is not self-centeredness.

For many of us the inwardness of the hermit's life will lead naturally to an engaged solitude that becomes an outlet for service. Engaged solitude nurtures and supports others through forms of service that are compatible with a solitary person's skills and abilities. Through engaged solitude the invisible connective tissue of a hermit's lifestyle reaches out in more ordinary ways as well. The practice of engaged solitude allows us to fulfill any obligations to family, friends or community that remain outstanding in our lives. But in engaged solitude an individual's great joy is still found through the connected aloneness in which he or she meets God.

The hermit offers the future both an example and an actual style of life that can have a calming and cooling-off effect on an emotionally overheated world. Who knows, maybe even the phenomenon of global warming will be lessened if there were a few more hermits out there.

A Word

From

Still Wood

A messy studio is a sign of much work in progress, right? We hope so! This issue of *Raven's Bread* is being composed amidst piles of two-inch squares of fabric, reams of paper from the first draft of a book-to-be; stacks of books to be catalogued; numerous letters (e-mail and snail mail) to be answered or filed and yes, one sleeping cat.

Paul was out in the woods yesterday, attempting to clear some fallen trees and brush and sort out firewood from mere trash. His task of clearing a living forest where every wind brings down new branches is no less daunting than trying to establish order in this studio where three and four ventures are going forward simultaneously.

I stoutly refuse to believe the old monastic axiom that the condition of one's cell (studio?) is a mirror of one's soul! God have mercy should that prove true!

Assembling this issue of *RB* has been a fascinating venture as we sorted through the various contributions, reflections and excerpts. In bringing some order to this collection of riches, we discovered a theme that bound the various articles together. Each one mentions that in the evolution of the hermit vocation, one attains a kind of "hospitality of the heart" that opens one to service and ministry to others. The forms this service can assume are always compatible with the hermit's commitment to silence and solitude but the development of this "hospitality" is inevitable in all who sincerely give themselves to seeking the Lord.

We received a few thoughtful responses to the question for this month: what was your most difficult issue in responding to the eremitical call? I look back on the awakening of my own call to solitude and realize that what proved most problematic for me was not what most folks proposed as obstacles, such as how to support myself or where to live or even how to define my hermit life.

No, the biggest issue was summoning up the courage to just take the leap and trust the Lord that there would be some place to land. And there always was! The most freeing lesson of my life is simply this: Whenever we give God the chance to prove God is for us, God will *always* come through! But we must give God that opportunity. As long as we insist on taking care of ourselves, we are allowed to do so. God shows "His mighty arm" when we stop flailing our own mighty arms.

With Grateful love,

Karen & Paul

www.Sounding Solitude

By: Scholastica Egan

From my experience of hermits over many years I would say their chief characteristic is a passion for God which nothing can deflect. Their prayer has reached an intensity for which solitude is the natural setting. There have always been religious who outgrow the structures and need the space and freedom of solitude.

There is no blueprint for the hermit life. Each hermit has a rule of life with a basic plan of prayer/reading/work, but each one does it differently with the freedom that is the mark of the Spirit. Those who quit the safe structures of community must quickly learn the basic skills of survival. Reasonably good health is essential to bear the considerable strains of the life, as also a fair degree of psychological maturity and emotional stability. We take upon ourselves a spiritual discipline that can radically change our lives and open for us more liberty of spirit than is possible within an institution.

A lot depends on temperament and the ability to adapt. The desire to live simply, to be content with less rather than more, taxes ingenuity and patience. It can also stimulate creativity: solitaries learn skills they had never thought of before. When I realized my own call to solitude in the 1970's it was uncharted territory. My first hermitage was a primitive woodland cottage on the edge of the north Yorkshire moors. My nearest neighbor was two miles away. The solitude and silence of those early years made a great impact. Coming from a busy life with distracting responsibilities, I had never known the solitude and silence I had hoped for in monastic life. Living close to nature in the woods a whole new vision of life emerged. I grew vegetables in the unpromising moorland soil, collected and sawed wood for my stove, and the hard physical work provided a natural asceticism.

I was fully alive, concentrated, open to every new experience. I moved tranquilly through each day with no interruption from bells or even a clock. I ate when I was hungry, I slept when I was tired. I observed with surprised joy what I had not noticed before, whether cooking a simple meal, digging in the garden or walking in the woods. I agreed with Thomas Merton, writing from his hermitage a few years before: 'One has to receive in meekness a new awareness of work, time, prayer, oneself. A new tempo.' I discovered one of the blessings of solitude is the liberation from the implicit demand to measure up to other people's expectations. I could be myself. As time went on a kind of grapevine sprang up which put me in touch with others living solitude or wishing to do so. We were able to encourage one another, to affirm one another, to share experience and sometimes practical help.

Solitude can thus provide a fine tuning for mind and heart so that we gain insight into the human condition; we become acutely sensitive to the crying needs of the world; the insecurity and lostness of so many today find echoes in our hearts. So it should not be surprising that people search out the hermits for advice and help not only spiritual matters, but also on the basic problems of living in society. Perhaps it is a test of our genuineness when we can respond to people on that human level.

(Reprinted by permission from the Religious Life Review, Dublin)

I MUST WALK IN THE WILD

I must walk in the wild,

pathless, the wind behind me,
led by the pull of north,
I shall be blind.
I will feel my way
on stoneshape, touch of bark,
the running streams
down my face. There will be
no sound, only the sharp

call of the bird whose voice I know.

I will climb the unseen mountain.

I will go alone.

By: Judith Lang

zzzzzzzzzzz Canonical Reflectionszzzzzzzzzz

By: Helen L. Macdonald

Researcher, Novalis, Saint Paul University, Ottawa, ON

Canon 603 (1983 Revision) retains the traditional terms "solitude and silence" as found in earlier legislation for monasticism where the terms were used to characterize anchoritic life in contrast to the cenobitic life of monks and nuns in community. How are these terms to be understood when applied to hermit life?

Solitude and silence do not mean that the hermit must live absolutely alone, never speaking to another human being, for this has never been the eremitical tradition. (Note: If one reads the "Sayings of the Desert Fathers", it is clear that mutual visits between hermits to discuss spiritual matters were accepted as normal for experienced hermits, although some might opt for complete silence, either temporarily or permanently.) Thus the Fathers of the Desert, receiving any visitor as though it was Christ who was present, practiced a carefully discerned hospitality. (Note: The desert solitaries tended to distinguish between those who came out of a desire to learn about solitude and those who came out of mere curiosity.)

They often met weekly for liturgy and visited one another, although with discretion. There is nothing in the canon forbidding the hermits in the diocese from meeting occasionally for mutual support. Depending on the number of hermits in the diocese, the bishop may wish to set up an association of diocesan hermits, as has been done in Spain.

Human relations, whether familial or societal, will be regulated by the hermit's personal rule of life and the necessity of breaking silence and solitude for the sake of charity. The hermit is usually someone whose prayer life has grown so intense as to demand a concentration that can only be found in solitude, a solitude that the hermit will not lightly compromise.

(Excerpted from "Hermits: The Juridical Implications of Canon 603, published in Studio canonica, 26, 1992)

Common to the Uncommon

Excerpted from a Study by Eugene Stockton, NSW, Australia

During my recent series of interviews with hermits and solitaries, I discovered that, as in former times, they exhibited a wide variety of states and life styles. But along with this amazing variety, my study brought to the fore a set of characteristics which the interviewees tended to have in common.

1. Strong Sense of Call

The subjects spoke of something stronger than the normal vocation (say to the priestly or religious state.) For some it went back to childhood and often enough they spoke of being contented loners as children.

2. Passion

Naturally coupled with the foregoing, it was readily spoken of as a relentless fire, something like a primal urge to be one with God.

3. Emotional Distance from Society

This meant not only freedom from the pressures of civil society, but even from the concerns of the Church, such that one could look on Church happenings in a detached objective way. This needs delicate interpretation as it does not mean any lesser love of the Church or sense of belonging.

4. Autonomy

A sense of sureness in ordering one's own life, fixing priorities, omitting what seems superfluous or inappropriate (for that individual), appraising one's own abilities. The more mature showed an integrated personality typified by ease, urbanity and balance.

5. Self-Sufficiency

Generally subjects did not look for support, whether material or spiritual, from Church or Congregation. It was understood one earned one's own keep or drew a pension.

6. Simplicity

This found expression not so much in poverty as in frugality. Possessions and concerns beyond one's present needs were seen as so much distracting baggage. Common was a disarming unconcern to provide for old age or sickness.

7. Stillness and Silence

This was the treasured bonus afforded by a simple, uncluttered life. Some spoke of a rich emptiness which sourced all creativity in their life, an emptiness filled by God alone.

8. Growth in Stewardship

Some found, after an initial radical withdrawal, a sense of service in the world by prayer or ministry without detriment to solitude, a sense of communion with others in loving concern and compassion. Following the daily News was a spur to prayer. I was reminded of flag-bearers accompanying an army into battle, unarmed, vulnerable, useless - except to show others direction and solidarity.

9. Detachment

A letting go of everything that has not to do with aloneness with God. There was a distinct wariness of being drawn into causes no matter how worthy or into activities (e.g. in the parish) which might develop into absorbing and distracting chores. For some, their way of life or location (like the Desert Fathers) might mean being deprived of the regular reception of the sacraments. In the spiritual life all such adjuncts are a means to an end and only God is the End, to whom some may be graced to attach themselves without intermediaries.

Topic for May 2000 Issue:

How have "disabilities" contributed positively to your life of prayer and solitude?

Deadline: April 4, 2000

"Silence is the winter name of God." anon.

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 $\underline{\textbf{15pp.}}$ \$ $\underline{\textbf{5.00}}$

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

Discernment Survey 1996 6pp. \$2.00

Raven's Rest

Retreatants welcome to schedule time after April 1, 2000 at *Raven's Rest* (a fully furnished apartment with private entrance) here at *Still Wood*. Offers opportunity to experience solitude and silence on a forested mountainside in the Smokies. Spiritual Direction available upon request. Suggested offering \$20.00 per day includes meals. For further information, contact:

Paul and Karen Fredette

P.O. Box 562 Hot Springs, NC 28743

Tel: 828-622-3750

BOOK NOTICES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Ladder, Parable-Stories of Ascension & Descension by Edward Hays. In crafting these parables in the ancient tradition of the Desert Mothers and Fathers, Hays calls the book a "handheld spiritual teacher for anyone eager to become a student of the mystical path." Paper 207pp \$13.95 (Available through Forest of Peace Publishing, Inc., P.O. Box 269, Leavenworth, KS 66048-0269. TEL:1-800-659-3227)

A Quarterly Magazine of interest to RB readers: "Forefront: The Desert and the City" Invites one to share the wisdom of others who hear the call of contemplation and find creative ways to live mindfully in the world. Published by The Spiritual Life Institute: One year \$16.00, Outside the US - \$20.00 US Funds; Order from: Spiritual Life Institute, Box 219, Crestone, CO 81131

Word and Silence: Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Spiritual Encounter between East and West) by Raymond Gawronski, SJ. Non-Christian traditions and the via negativa, and their relationship to christian mysticism based on the Word Revealed and the place of silence in the Christian spiritual life. William B. Eerdman Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI 1995, Hard Cover, 232 pp

The Angels of God: Understanding Scripture by Judith Lang. *Discusses the role of angels as Mediators, Messengers, Ministers and in Apocalyptic literature.* New City Press, Hyde Park, NY Paper 240 pp. \$11.01 (UK £9.95)

Peace is Every Step; The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life by Thick Nhat Hahn. Shows how the deep meditative presence is available in everyday situations and pressures. Bantom Books 1992, Paper 134pp. \$10.36



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