



Raven's Bread

Food for Those in Solitude

Online Edition

May 2018

Thoughts In Solitude

"Why don't you just go," I said. "Will you be ok?" he asked. "Yes, I'll be fine. Just go. St. Paul is waiting for you. And my mom and dad will be there, too. Tell them 'Hi' for me." With that, my husband left me for a new life. His cancer came on quickly and he battled it bravely, but the cancer had spread to his lungs, to his bones and his brain. No more could be done and it was time for him to leave his battered body behind. I would be fine, I assured him. And then the reality struck. Our children were grown and gone. I have no family as my parents are both deceased and I have no siblings. I was alone in our house, alone in northern Arizona, just alone.

I like to take baths. Showers are utilitarian, a way to get clean, but baths are a deep, soothing experience with very hot water and generous bubbles. One evening, while in the bathtub, the depth of my grief hit me. I pulled the plug and watched the water swirl down the drain. I wanted to go down the drain, too. I wanted to go down the drain and disappear. Could I face the future alone? I was no longer brave; I was no longer in control of my loss; I no longer had an answer or solution. I just sat in the empty tub for quite a while, afraid to get out as I knew that, by grabbing the towel and stepping out of the tub, I would be stepping into the unknown alone. I was empty and suddenly afraid. I was left with nothing by my naked self, both in body and in spirit. Little did I know then that that emptiness would spawn a new reality for me, one of fullness, joy, peace.

Today, twenty-one years later, I am still alone, alone by choice but far from empty. I have no fear of standing naked, not necessarily in the body, but naked before God. Going down the drain, either figuratively or literally, is no longer a desire or an option.

Eight hundred years ago, Francis of Assisi prayed, "O God, who are You? And who am I?" As I watched the water go down the drain on that night many years ago, I had to ask myself the question, "Who am I?" I had done everything—education, travel, career, business, social service, marriage motherhood. But these were what I had **done**, not necessarily who I **am**. I was suddenly faced with the real "I" behind the doing.

In my professional life, I came to know a very fine psy-

chotherapist. After my husband's death, I decided to ask for help and so I paid her a visit. She was adept at directing me beyond my "doing" to focus on my "being". She was good at giving assignments in preparation for the next session. After a few sessions and diligently doing my assignments, I shared with her that I had decided that I wanted to live the rest of my life in simple elegance. She gave me a big smile, thanked me for coming, and told me that I didn't need to visit her any more. I am now a very busy lady but I live my busyness in simple elegance. Yes, the simple elegance is cosmetic as I attempt to keep my living area free of clutter. But, even more important than cosmetics, my simple elegance is a deep stirring within me to stop periodically and quiet myself, to get naked in the heart of my being, to set everything aside and to just "be". It is a desire for solitude, to be alone with myself and with the Higher Power who loves and sustains me.

St. Francis opens his *Document on Solitude* with an emphasis on being: *Those who wish to be in a religious manner...* For Francis I think a *religious manner* meant to touch the Transcendental, to get in touch with his own depth and that which is beyond him....

I have to call upon my own discipline to remove and prohibit distractions. On some days when I don't have the luxury of much time, it is the "off" button that guards my solitude: off with the phone, the radio, and the computer for a limited time. On other days solitude, for me, is the simplicity of setting everything aside: the "to do" list; my interactions with others; the tasks that I have taken on with my writing and my art, my sewing and my music; even my participation in the Secular Franciscan Order. The elegance has become the getting in touch with who I am and who God is. None of this can be done without solitude.

Excerpted from "*The Gift of Solitude*"
By Mary Esther Stewart, OSF
Found In
Prayer of Franciscan Solitude
By Andre Cirino, OFM & Josef Raischl, OFS



Just as we started composing this, a bird began to chirp, calling for a mate. April is a month we like to compare to the shy fawn who appear and dis-appear without much warning. So far the advent of spring has been more one of hope rather than *things seen*. A few warm days which tease out shoots and buds on the trees followed by nights of frost and snow which put all greening on hold.

We have feared for our flowering crab tree which has just reached the stage where buds are shedding their protective sheaths in preparation for blooming. Will it be frost bitten once again? The tree is a glorious vision when it blooms but a truly sad sight when brown blossoms droop and fall off.

So often we suffer the equivalent of frost bite when, after finding what we believe is our true path, we lose faith in ourselves (and God) and fail to follow it, allowing all the new life which had been possible to wither and die. Fortunately for us, we are not flowering crabs tied to a single season. If we miss our time for flowering, we are always offered another chance, for God's loving call persists like soft spring sunlight.

Many of us now living a life of prayerful solitude can look back on years of waiting, hoping, almost launching into this way of life, and then being prevented by some unexpected turn of events. However, the lure of this call did not die in us, and

like the sap rising in the spring, we finally found a way to bloom in God-given solitude.

As you peruse this issue of *Raven's Bread*, you will find a lot of communication from readers, both in the *Forum* and in the *Hermits Ask and Respond* columns. This truly delights us for our dream for *RB* has always been that it be written by our "ravens" themselves, flying in with rich nuggets of experience and reflection. The topic of the place of digital devices, the use of computers and the internet, has evoked many varied insights grounded in the personal experience of the writers. We suspect that this shall be an evolving matter as the future of digital devices and services continues to develop.

With regard to the Forum, everyone is invited to comment on past topics, or offer some particular insight or brief reflection deriving from their living in holy solitude. We encourage these interchanges among our readers and urge you all to send us your thoughts so that solitaires in one part of the world can learn about hermit life as it is lived elsewhere. Our readership spans the planet and grows from issue to issue.

Our sincere prayer for all of you, our friends, is that you will

*With our grateful love,
Karen & Paul*

Raven's Bread is a quarterly newsletter (FEB-MAY-AUG-NOV) for hermits and those interested in solitary life published by Paul and Karen Fredette. It affirms and encourages people living in solitude. As a collaborative effort, it is written for and by hermits themselves, delivered by postal mail or email. Please send your written contributions, address changes, and subscription donations to: pkfredette@frontier.com or *Raven's Bread Ministries*, 18065 NC 209 Hwy., Hot Springs, NC 28743 or via PayPal at our website.* Our phone number is: 828 622 3750.

An annual donation is appreciated, each giving according to their means. Please send payment in US dollars (PayPal converts foreign currency to US dollars). Anything extra goes into a fund to insure that all who want *Raven's Bread* can receive it.

Raven's Bread derives its name from the experience of the prophet Elijah in 1 Kings 17: 1-6, where a raven sent by God nourished him during his months of solitude at the Wadi Cherith (The Cutting Place).

*Our website is: <http://www.ravensbreadministries.com>; our email: pkfredette@frontier.com and the Blog for Lovers of Solitude: www.ravensbreadministries.com/blog.



The 2016 Survey of Hermits and Religious Solitaries...continued



not the land on which it is situated. A man trades work for shelter. Those who are caregivers share the home of the parent or relative whom they attend to. One woman describes herself as a “sort of insider-outsider in an intentional Christian community.” Finding a suitable/affordable place to live as a solitary is a challenge that is met in an amazing variety of ways.

One question not asked in the earlier survey was whether one had a pet companion. Not quite half (63) said they did. The species covers the spectrum from fish, to birds, to rabbits, to cats and every breed of dog. One respondent claimed a “turtle and two fish” while another has “two cats and all their fleas!” A married hermit claimed that she had two pets, one of which is monastic, the other not suited for such a life. One man called himself a shepherd hermit with cattle, sheep and goats but as he has aged, he now has only donkeys, two dogs and a cat. Many hermits have cats and had they been a solitary in the Middle Ages, a cat would have been a requirement in order to control vermin.

When we asked specifically how solitaries lived, the popular stereotype of the reclusive hermit was definitely debunked as only two actually live in the wilderness. The largest number (43) live in rural areas while 39 are in suburbia. Thirty-three are urban, 9 living in the inner city and another 9 dwelling on the grounds of religious communities. A number of these latter voluntarily offered a caution about such a situation, claiming that it is often less than ideal because the communities laid down many strictures on what they allowed or expected. Only three respondents said they lived in a hermit group or laura.

Twenty-nine other respondents have found unique ways to subsist as hermits, such as: a “small patio home in a forested area,” a “very little private space (12qm) in a small house” where traumatized teenagers (and two rabbits) are cared for. Another woman withdraws to her own room in a ranch house where she is employed to cook and clean. Many say that they live on the outer edges of small towns. One solitary says he “lives in an 8-plex in a wooded, tucked away part of a city.” A hermit in Australia identifies herself as a “hermit in community” - her community being her local town and a network of hermits and solitary friends. Not surprisingly, given we are considering individuals mainly in the second half of life, a fair number are living either in apartments or cottages of a continuing care community.

So, what to say at this point? Solitude can be found wherever life puts us—in wide open spaces or a private room. We see as well pioneering efforts to bring the ancient religious practice of eremitism into the 21st century. Does this vitality involve a relaxing of the rigors essential to being hermits or solitaries, or is this a necessary adaptation to keep the practice of solitude alive today? The need for and survival of people who are deeply centered in solitude, silence, and prayer is evident to anyone who studies our rapidly changing culture.



BOOK NOTES AND REVIEWS



PRAYER OF FRANCISCAN SOLITUDE by Andre Cirino OFM and Josef Raischl OFS.

This is an anthology of articles and reflections by men and women who live in a variety of circumstances, from formal religious communities to secular affiliations in the Franciscan family. The depth and quality of the contributions is amazing and provides generous food for thought, as well as encouragement for all solitaries.

168 pp. \$16.95 pbk. Published by Tau Publishing, LLC 2018.

ISBN 13: 978-161956-577-7

SOLITUDE: In Pursuit of a Singular Life in a Crowded World by Michael Harris.

A life without solitude is a diminished life. What makes this book so timely is that it serves to remind us of solitude’s value and is a call to resist the elements of our culture which would deny it to us. Read it in peace.

272 pp. \$17.15 hbk \$11.31 pbk. Thomas Dunne Books 2017.

ISBN-10: 1250088607; ISBN-13: 978-1250088604

STRENGTH IN STILLNESS: The power of Transcendental Meditation by Bob Roth

Stillness of mind and body is a gift. This book distills the essence of transcendental meditation so that anyone can access it. It is needed at this time in history to lend assistance in the way forward for all humanity.

224 pp. \$16.32 hbk; . Published by Simon & Schuster 2018.

ISBN-10-1501161210; ISBN-13: 978-1501161216