



# Raven's Bread

*Food for Those in Solitude*

*Online Edition*

*August 2017*

## Thoughts In Solitude

When I considered a hermitage experience as a part of my twelve month sabbatical, I had little understanding to draw upon. I made yearly directed retreats, and three months prior to entering a hermitage, a thirty-day retreat. But a hermitage experience seemed to be of a different ilk all together.

In 1985, when I participated in a Capuchin-Franciscan renewal program, I learned that St. Francis of Assisi spent about four months a year in hermitages and that he had about twenty such places where he would go for various periods of time. Our renewal group visited the first friary of the reform-minded Capuchins who made contemplation the linchpin of their reform. I decided to investigate the surrounding hillsides to find a cave that might have been a contemplative spot for one of the early Capuchins and to spend a day of fasting and prayer there. After reading scripture, napping, being hungry, and wandering around a bit, I arrived at a principle that helped me to understand the purpose of contemplation: choosing to minimize distractions enables one to maximize attentiveness....

My desire to spend a lot of time alone also motivated me towards a hermitage experience. I was disappointed in almost everything: the hierarchical church, the way I and others lived out priesthood, the local community experience of people never getting close, the way my province of friars actualized our mission statement and pastoral plan, and the way fraternities prayed. I wanted to isolate myself from others except when I knew I could experience some intimacy and acceptance (with family, friends, counselor, spiritual director). When my sabbatical began, I treasured the privacy, my own schedule, my own desires, and I found myself avoiding fraternity as much as possible. Since being alone had been good for me, it seemed like God was inviting me to deepen it by spending time as a hermit....

I initially planned to give sixty days to the hermitage experience; however, even during a twelve month sabbatical, sixty days can be hard to find. Two family celebrations took ten days out of the experience and two other planned sabbatical events cramped the beginning and the end of the sixty days; however, left with forty-five days, I began my hermitage on 3 May and ended it on 28 June (1994).

### WHAT I LEARNED:

I quickly realized that I needed a larger support system than I had anticipated, appreciating the wisdom that St. Francis of Assisi wrote into his Rule for hermitages: When someone goes into hermitage, there should be two friars acting as "mother" to take care of the hermit's needs and to see to it that he is undisturbed. Although I needed no one to guard the hermitage, I did need mothering friars. In the beginning, I went to the friary every day for a shower since the cottage was too cool for a sponge bath. When I did so, I shared the noon meal with the friars. They provided me with instructions about how to use the primitive necessities of the hermitage. They also supplied me with a fax and computer when I needed to communicate about a future ministry placement at the end of my sabbatical. Although sixteen miles away, the friars were my security.

While infused contemplation can never be gained by human effort, acquired contemplation can. By taking long, loving looks at reality, a contemplative spirit does develop because one has the leisure in which to do it. Leisure is essential to the hermitage and contemplative experience. Because I had no demands on me, except those that were self-imposed, times of prayer and reflection were naturally extended in length as I entered more deeply into the experience of solitude. Yet I still needed to discipline myself in order to encourage the contemplative spirit. I had to tell myself frequently to sit when I wanted to jump up impulsively and do something, to pause and look while on my walks, to slow down my eating habits, my driving speed, my task completion compulsion while doing manual work, and even to take time to view the moon and stars at night when I was tired. In a hermitage, one can become more aware of one's habitual way of acting and try to act differently.



*Excerpted from:*

### **A Hermitage Experience**

**By Perry McDonald**

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*A Word  
From  
Still Wood*



*Basilica of Santa Chiara, Assisi, Italy*

We had planned it as the “vacation of a lifetime”. We had waited twenty-one years and finally, we would take that cruise down the Rhine River with close friends, then cross the Alps by train into Italy where we would pilgrimage in Assisi for several days before returning to Basel, Switzerland, to fly home.

On several occasions, over the years we have shared with you, the readers, our firm conviction that, “If you want to make God laugh, just tell Him/Her what Your Plans are.” Our dream vacation did not become a laughing matter for us. We both came down with chest colds not long after starting the cruise, and Karen’s gradually worsened into double pneumonia. We had barely finished a brief visit to the Porziuncula in Santa Maria degli Angeli in the valley just below Assisi, when Karen needed to be hospitalized. For the next fourteen days, five of them in ICU, Karen endured her illness, in sight of, but denied entry to the city she most loved.

For years Karen had promised Paul to one day show him Assisi. Now Paul had to explore Assisi on his own between hospital visits with an old city map and Karen’s remembrances. This was not the plan.

Solitude, unexpectedly imposed, or otherwise is not automatically holy. It becomes holy only insofar as one accepts the unwanted loneliness of a hospital bed in a foreign country or wandering the streets of a medieval city unaccompanied by one’s soul mate. In the effort to accept what IS as opposed to what might, could, should have been, the grace of holy solitude is offered. The empty space surrounding us can now be filled with the presence of the One whose angels minister to our helplessness, in so many surprising ways. A Franciscan Pilgrimage group from Cincinnati, Ohio, at the Casa Papa Giovanni (where Paul was staying) that prayed for Karen everyday. A young Romanian couple Paul met at a bus stop that sponta-

neously offered him a free ride to the Foligno Hospital 20 Kilometers away. A nameless young man who overheard Paul’s conversation with a conductor and prevented him from taking the wrong train. A cook’s husband who lived in Foligno and offered Paul several rides to and from the hospital. A sweet compassionate couple caring for their own mother in the hospital bed next to Karen who offered her their friendship, moral support, basic amenities, and the gift of translating from Italian to English and back again with doctors, nurses, and attendants. And of course, that feral cat that pattered down the steps of a roof-top garden and climbed unbidden into Paul’s lap to offer purrs and affection when he felt most bereft.

Of course, we do ask: why! What can such an ordeal mean? And like most we are left with the timeless poignant advice of the poet, Rainer Maria Rilke: “Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart...Try to love the questions themselves. Do not now seek answers which cannot be given because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.”

*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](mailto: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>; email: [pkfredette@frontier.com](mailto:pkfredette@frontier.com) and Blog for Lovers of Solitude: [www.ravensbreadministries.com/blog](http://www.ravensbreadministries.com/blog).**

## Wood B. Hermit



**A**s I grew older the things I cared about grew fewer, but were more important. So one day I undid the lock and called the trash man He took everything. I felt like the little donkey when his burden is finally lifted. Things! Burn them, burn them! Make a beautiful fire! More room in your heart for love, for the trees! For the birds who own nothing—the reason they can fly.

excerpt from "Storage"  
by Mary Oliver



## BOOK NOTES AND REVIEWS



**THE POWER OF SILENCE: Against the Dictatorship of Noise** by Robert Cardinal Sarah & Nicholas Diat *"In a time when technology penetrates our lives in so many ways and materialism exerts such a powerful influence over us, Cardinal Robert Sarah from Africa presents a bold book about the strength of silence. The modern world generates so much noise, he says, that seeking moments of silence has become both harder and more necessary than ever before."*

249 pp. \$13.33 pbk. Published by Ignatius Press 2017.

ISBN 10:1621641910; ISBN 13: 978-0-1621641919

**SOLITUDE & SILENCE: Spiritual Disciplines Bible Studies** by Jan Johnson *"I was expecting this to be a book on silence and solitude but it is more like a bible study guide. I think that might be actually better because it references scripture to support its text. I haven't completed the whole book but so far I enjoy how the book makes me reflect and relate my behavior to the scriptures."* (Kathryn C. Mullins)

64 pp. \$13.95 pbk. IVP Connect 2003.

ISBN-10: 0830820973; ISBN-13: 978-0830820979

**SACRED RHYTHMS: Arranging our Lives for Spiritual Transformation** by Ruth Haley Barton

*This author offers much wise, sane, concrete help for people who are ready for the 'more' of God amidst their busy lives, and want a better way to arrange their lives to receive God's transforming presence. She clearly spells out an excellent rhythm of classical spiritual practices that can keep us open and available to God's transforming actions in and among us. She grounds these practices in our own deepest desires, connecting those desires with God's desire for our well being.*

192 pp. \$10.45 hbk. Published by IVP Books 2006.

ISBN-10-0830833331; ISBN-13: 978-0830833337

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## A Personal Reflection On Days in a Daze



The director of the *pensione* (Casa Papa Giovanni) knocked on my door at 9:30pm on Friday evening to tell me that the hospital had just called saying Karen was being taken by ambulance from Assisi Hospital to nearby Foligno Hospital, a larger better equipped facility, but that she would be in ICU and not available for a visit until at least 1:00 PM. So I laid awake a good part of this last night in June. I sat at the window and leaned out looking over a large swath of Umbrian Valley below Assisi stretched out before me with all its small lights like so many strewn diamonds. I begged for the grace not to lose my composure, to stay calm, to act “as if” she were at my side...exactly where she had been almost every single night for over twenty years.

Our dream had been to come to Assisi together; she had been twice before on Franciscan Study Pilgrimages, but she wanted to “show me Assisi” herself, all the special places that meant so much to her. Over the years we had spoken of this endlessly, and she had described it in such great detail that I could actually find my way around without a guide, “as if” she were right beside me.

Eventually, I did doze off and was awakened by the sound of the larks flying by my open window. Hundreds of them. I leaned out and felt as if I were actually in the Franco Zeffirelli film, **Brother Sun, Sister Moon**, as these exaltations of larks danced over Assisi and the surrounding countryside. It was magical, it was grace. It was Saturday morning, the air was so fresh and the sky so blue, but it would get very warm soon. Neither the tourists nor the pilgrims were up yet, the streets were empty save for the occasional cat. I watched as the sun crept across the valley to shine upon the dome of the basilica of St. Mary of the Angels. It housed “The Little Portion” as St Francis called it, the small rustic chapel that was home to him for so many years and the chapel outside which he died...the only “holy site” Karen and I visited and prayed at together before rushing her to the hospital.

At breakfast in the dining room of the Casa, the Franciscan pilgrimage people, many of whom already knew Karen through her book, **Clare: Her Light and Her Song**, also realized that we were *Raven's Bread*, and asked about her and promised continued prayers. Supportive as they were though, I knew if I was to get any inner clarity and calm, I had to find a few hours in a quiet place to pray and sort out “now what?” Without any well formulated plan in mind, I left the Casa and walked the still empty medieval Via San Paulo back down to the central Piazza di Commune, extant and mostly unchanged since the days of Francis and Clare. Past the large fountain of water-spewing lions, my steps led me through an arch, once a city gate, that took me in the direction of the Basilica of St. Clare. As I approached that facade of pale rose stone, so simple yet so strong, it came to me with the utmost certainty where I needed to be. My steps lightened as I passed by its buttresses and kept going down the street and out the Porta Nuova. There I paused and looked for a sign “literally”. And just to my right, only a few feet away, under the shade of an ancient tree, there it was.

The walking path to the Friary of San Damiano is a gentle downward tree-lined slope, requiring only one street crossing where life is threatened by Italian drivers. On this gentle early Saturday morning I encountered no one as I ambled along past amazingly tall cedars and numerous groves of olive trees. In my heart I felt distant echoes of John of the Cross...the night journey of the soul and the anticipation of one's beloved. Of course, I had seen so many postcards, photos, movies, and videos over the years, but somehow, I was still surprised and awed by the silent simplicity, and the stillness I experienced as I reached the end of the walkway and turned to see the façade of that little church where it all began: where Francis had heard the voice from the (now famous) crucifix asking him to go and rebuild Christ's church, and where Clare had made her home for the rest of her life.

Slowly, I walked across the small piazza and greeted a friar who was sweeping the walkway in a pair of shorts and T shirt. I entered two small outer chapels adjacent to the main church, taking in the frescoes and windows Karen had so vividly described. Then, with quiet but deliberate steps, I entered the church of San Damiano. I found myself alone in the presence of the One. I looked around at the ancient stone walls, once rebuilt by St. Francis himself, and I knelt down. In a moment I looked up at the great Crucifix now so famous and felt in my heart that I was safe, that she was safe, that we were home even far from home. I was able to pray alone in the silent serenity of this chapel for more than an hour before another soul walked in.

It's nearly impossible to express in words, what my spirit experienced as I prayed for Karen in that place where the great dream first took shape and found a voice in the humble troubadour of Assisi. As I left, I could feel the strength and determination of St Clare who lived out her life within these walls, and I knew that whatever lay ahead of us, neither Karen nor I were for a single second outside of God's loving care.

*Pax et Bonum, Paul*