



# Raven's Bread

*Food for Those in Solitude*

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*Online Edition*

*November 2011*

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## Thoughts In Solitude

On night I dreamed I was hosting a big Christmas party, lots of folks there, kids all over the place. We were about to sit down to supper when I suggested a game and called out, "Alright, if you want to be at the top of the food chain, tell us a story first." Total silence. A collective thought "bubble" (like those in comic strips) rose up: "The host has two heads!" Try again. "First one to tell a story, even a short one, is the first to the table." Silence still and some annoyance this time, as if I were saying a twenty minute grace. "Why cantcha just let us eat?" A few seemed to be trying to think of something to say, either warming to the idea or trying to humor the host. Still the silence prevailed, a mix of perplexity and mild annoyance, and when I abandoned the proposed game, relief. In the spirit of the season and the delicacies of the table, my indiscretion was "all forgiven" as the crowd fell like a wave on the feast.

A question raised by my dream still lingered when I wakened. Have we lost our story or our ability to tell it? Is it even considered as we "tuck in" to the feast of life, forgetting that life is a feast? Stories are composed of little pieces, sometimes oddly connected, that call for a narrative. Still waking from that dream, I recalled that I, too, was stumped at my own challenge, trying to connect things in a way that could amuse, instruct or do what a story is supposed to do.

I awoke on Christmas Day, remembering that my dream was of a Christmas party; we already have the story, so why was everyone, including myself, stumped? Beginning with the first Story, the one that gives us a reason for feasting, there are lots more. Even that first story is told in two different ways with the shepherds in Luke and the Magi in Matthew. Scholars tell us that blending the two narratives without any distinction as in most Nativity crèches is "theologically incorrect". Once the question is addressed, "why the shepherds in Luke and the Magi in Matthew?", we fail to get the full story if "never the twain shall meet." Perhaps our erroneous crèches tell us a story that theology never could; our jumbled retellings revealing a greater wisdom. I am inclined to think that theologians

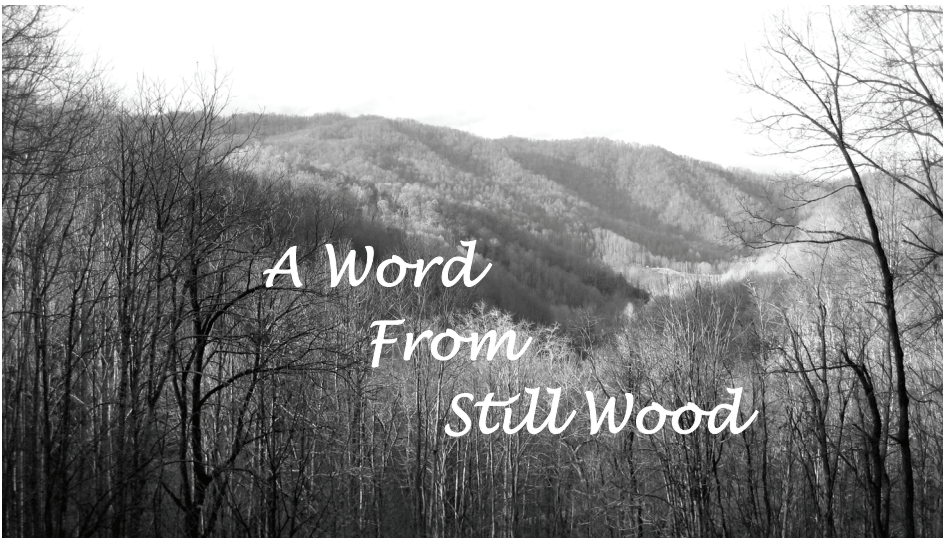
should sit quietly at the feast (if they eat, they can't talk) and let the folks tell the story. From the One Story comes many, ancient, new, or still in the living and making.

We are told "Jesus is the reason for the Season." When the tag is properly used, it gently reminds us to return to the main Story. But the Story should also remind us that we are the reason for Jesus. Even when our seasonal narratives don't mention his name, they imply it. In "A Christmas Carol", Scrooge's nephew seems to best sum up the "what for" of Christ's Birth, describing the season as kindly, forgiving and charitable, "when men and women seem by one consent, to open their shut up hearts freely ..." Our stories, coming from this opening of hearts, if only for one season, is our part of the narrative, without which, even an all self-sufficient Deity can only tell an incomplete story. It would be a gift not received or worse, discarded.

All our various traditional observances, and the human experiences out of which they come and through which they continue, reflect how we respond to an irresistible message of hope. We don't all articulate it in the same way. It crosses all creeds and requires none to contribute to a soup kitchen, to gather and reconcile with family or friends, to take a breather and appreciate what we have, to console the grieving or to just enjoy the feast. The attempts we make to do so are our part of the story; "Christ was born for this", even if we aren't thinking about it at the time. We were born for this. Even our non-Christmas stories repeat the theme of home. Every story that recounts movement from slavery to freedom, healing of body, soul, relationships, fidelity and unconditional love tells us: Christ was born for this and so are we.

Our Christmas story has its shadow side as well, for in it we see the worst of ourselves as well as the best. Can we ever imagine the poverty of that first birth, the hostility of an enraged king and the terror of his threat? In the light of birth is the shadow of death, above the crèche is the cross. War, injustice, human inflicted misery still abounds. It is bad enough that we often do not believe in anything higher than ourselves but goodness itself seems

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## A Word From Still Wood

As we began planning the November issue, I jotted down notes for “A Word from Still Wood.” The Latin phrase *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* leapt to my lips in a moment of wry humor. This title of John Henry Newman’s famous autobiographical work had always sounded to me like an apology for living, rather than his explanation of what had shaped his life. We will spare you our “apologia’s” and turn to the genuine apologies we owe you as our readers and contributors.

First of all, we regretfully acknowledge our mistake in attributing the beautiful lead article by John Petrenka of Emmaus, PA to John Pestian from Ohio. Both gentlemen have kindly forgiven us this error which is much more than just an “oop’s.” We are indeed very sorry about it.

Next, we regret any shock or dismay which readers may have felt on receiving an email, apparently from us, marketing very inappropriate items. Our email address list had been hacked into but we immediately took steps to prevent it from happening again. Please be assured that our email address list is secure and your privacy safeguarded. No one could have been more embarrassed then we were to have our names associated with such a crass come-on.

Speaking of email, we are happy to announce that “high tech” has finally reached us back here in the mountains and we now have high speed internet service. As a

result, we can offer to send the full edition of *Raven’s Bread* via email to readers who prefer to receive it in that form. A number of you have asked for that convenience in recent years. Starting with the February 2012 issue, we will send **RB** “paperless” as a PDF file attachment to whomever contacts us and provides their email address. All the rest will continue to receive the newsletter as always – via US postal service.

And speaking of the Post Office, we regret that the “Or Current Resident” appearing on the USA addresses is disturbing to some. It is simply required so we can send **RB** at bulk mail rate. Please bear with this

annoyance for the sake of keeping subscription rates unchanged. In this regard, we want to express our profound gratitude to all of you who responded to our August notice and sent in your subscriptions, often with some extra for readers in need. Please be assured that all donations to **Raven’s Bread Ministries** are used only for that purpose.

Finally, we wish to clarify the “vision” we mentioned in the August issue – we were only asking that you hold this possibility in **PRAYER** together with us. We ourselves have no intention of purchasing the thousand acre tract which is selling for twelve million dollars! We *would* like to see some person or group buy the land and place it in a Nature Conservancy or something similar. The property is not totally wild and requires some oversight so that existing roads, trails and buildings can remain in useful condition. A hermit laura to help with that is an enticing vision, is it not?

May you all enjoy the gifts of the holidays and holy days which are upon us – Thanksgiving for all God’s gifts; the gentle quiet anticipation of Advent; the joy of gifting others as God has gifted us during the Christmas season.

*With grateful love,  
Karen & Paul*

**Raven’s Bread** is a quarterly newsletter (FEB-MAY-AUG-NOV) for hermits and those interested in eremitical life published by Paul and Karen Fredette. This newsletter seeks to affirm and support people living in solitude. **Raven’s Bread** is a collaborative effort and thus depends on the shared reflections, stories, news, notices, letters and information from hermits themselves.

Please send your written contributions, address changes, and subscription donations to: **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, The annual donation is \$10.00 in the USA or \$12.00 US for readers outside the States. Please send payment in US funds (PayPal can convert foreign currency to US dollars.) Any extra donations will be used to subsidize subscriptions for hermits who cannot afford the full cost.

**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.ravenbreadministries.com](http://www.ravenbreadministries.com)

## SURRENDER TO SOLITUDE

Night's soft surround begins here in the gloaming, with crickets and cicadas, vast tidal currents of sound rising up to flood the tall green crowns of pines, then cascading down and out into thick green grass, carrying the safe contours and certain colors of day into mysterious darkness. Soon the stars will out. I shall find them in the sky, of course, splayed and spangled, but if I look amidst the bristled, ebony boughs I shall find them, ripe cones of light and if I look into the onyx river, I shall find them, submerged shells of light, and if, with some sixth or seventh sense I could look into the obscure pitch of my own heart, I should find stars there as well, incandescent, lamp-like, ready to hand should I choose to venture forth on whatever darksome path.

"And the light came from her body, and the night went through her grace," keens Leonard Cohen in his song, "Our Lady of Solitude." Devotion to the Virgin under that title began as a Holy Saturday observance, when the faithful entrusted to her the liminal hours between Good Friday's crucifixion and Easter Sunday's resurrection. In the 17th century, a donkey staggered into Oaxaca, Mexico and collapsed, dead. No one knew where it had come from, but when they examined his pack, they found a statue of Mary that wore a crown of diamonds and a black velvet robe. They built a church on the spot, and devotion to Our Lady of Solitude, patroness of mariners, is an integral part of Mexican spirituality to this day.

In the mid 1990's, I placed my own liminal hours in Mary's hands, leaving my cramped Manhattan apartment for a month-long retreat amidst the sand and saguaro cactus of the Arizona desert surrounding Our Lady of Solitude House of Contemplative Prayer. Sr. Therese Sedlock, the founder, shared her eremitical lifestyle with a revolving community of seekers, each of us inhabiting one of four hermitages, the name of which, Sister explained, would symbolize the retreat's unique charism for its inhabitant. Mine was called *Adsum*, "Here I am," three words across which Abraham walked, plank-like, between the moment he heard God call his name and the moment he heard God's command, "Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love..."

Here I am now, far from that desert in space and time. "Here I am," the crickets sing, echoing my thought. "Here I am," the quarter moon whispers, emerging from her hermitage of clouds. "Here I am," the jellyfish repeat, their presence announced not by sight or sound but by scent, a faint tang in the air most likely identifiable only to someone raised on this river, as I was. Scientists say there is no such thing as an objective observer. Reality is a participatory, interactive, relational event, since what we think of as matter is, at the quantum level, interconnected webs of energy, fields of possibility, waves of probability that ebb and flow as occasions, as events, as objects shaping each other in the very moment of encounter. Here I am, then a concatenation of energies called crickets, called moon, called jellyfish, pier, river, woman, once solitary jewels, now together, a glimmering crown to grace the night as she slips on her velvet black robe.

In the mauve light, I can just make out a heron perched on a nearby piling. All summer long she has fished these waters, skimming the surface as she flew from one secluded cove to another. In her throaty cry I hear Sr. Therese's words to me reverberate down the years. "If you were called to solitude, solitude would have sought you out." I had laughed at the time: abandoned at birth, an orphanage, my adopted father in his grave before my seventh birthday? Surely solitude had sought me out, skimming the surface of my life again and again as I sought for the absent primal bond, the missing family connection in religious community, in marriage, in myriad affiliations that seemed to promise communion yet always returned me to one secluded cove or another, where I would fish alone plagued by ambivalence toward the solitude I craved but also mistrusted. Is it truly God's call or just attachment disorder? Is it a yes unto greater life or a no to that pesky, uncontrollable human element?

My heron companion flies from her perch, flapping her two great and necessary wings. If there is only attraction and no repulsion, then the solitary is merely a misanthrope. If there is only allurement and no resistance, then the eremitical life is just a pleasure cruise. A vocation to solitude is a beckoning into the gloaming, that liminal state where safety and certainty fade into the soft surround. Our *Adsum*, like Abraham's, comes after invitation, before sacrifice. We navigate uncharted depths, our patroness a woman who has stood in the ebb and flow of two energy fields. There we must stand as well, between crucifixion and resurrection, between memory and possibility, surrendering ourselves to the doubts that pound like nails, to the abyss of hours that gapes like an empty tomb.

In the dictionary, the primary legal definition of "surrender" is "to give up an estate to the person who has it in remainder, so as to merge it into a larger estate." Such is the solitary's gift. Consider these fish that jump with exuberant abandon straight up into the air, slapping the water's still surface when they fall. Probability, derived from past experience, says the fish are fleeing predators or chasing flies. But here I am in an empty moment, imagination fluttering like a shroud. What if, having all day watched winged shadows overhead, the fish are hurling themselves into the mauve air in hopes of achieving flight? What if the solitary consciousness, freed from memory's constricting grasp on the individual "I am", offers itself to the larger estate, the great and cosmic "I AM" which is even now hurling itself into a mauve future where the hard edges of separation fade into communion. Where light shines through the ink-black sky, the ebony trees, the onyx river, the pitch-dark obscurities of every human heart. Light like a lamp pouring forth from this body, this Christ, and the nights are as the days, flowing through this grace.

Elizabeth Ayers, Tall Timbers, MD

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to be on trial. Gift giving becomes greed, the season of excess on one hand; hunger, homelessness and despair on the other. Still the message is this: Christ was born for this, and so are we, to take our share in it and to bring relief where possible. Unperceived, he is in the one who suffers, he is in the one who succors.

If we are left stumped in telling our Story, it might be that we have become injured to it, have lost it in the tinsel. Maybe it's indigestion, or having too much company or not enough quiet time or sleep. But even as we try to reflect on the Story, our Story, if through our thoughts and actions it becomes our very life-blood, we can still be stumped in the telling because it is, in the end, one of unspeakable mystery and joy.



**Michael Sheridan  
South Otselic, NY**

**Discussion Topic for February 2012**

Tell us what single word or phrase describes solitary life at its best and why.

**Submit by January 1, 2012**

**Wood B. Hermit**



**“Lord, heed this sweet smelling smoke. Make his life also sweet smelling. A holy thing fitting for you.” Masai Prayer**

***By Raven's Bread Readers:***

**OCEAN MEADOWS, MEDITATIONS FOR THE MYSTIC, PART ONE: ARISING RIPENESS** by Drew Larson.

*This soft-cover, ring-bound book is produced with lots of white space surrounding a few words which suggest the meditation of the moment. This sparse simplicity coupled with deeply searching content makes this volume ideal for hermits who can, when they wish, use it as a substitute for reciting the Liturgy of the Hours, since it calls the reader to “be still and know” three times a day. The author says “This first collection is for those beginning or those wishing to begin again.” He adds, “We are all constrained by the framework we have made for ourselves. The journey of the mystic is to an ever more open framework while still having the support for the moment by moment discipline.” Copies may be obtained from Drew Lawson, 169 Neilborough Road, Eaglehawk, Victoria, 03556, Australia.*

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