

Retreats for Adults

“As a deer longs for flowing streams”

By Shirley Dodson

“I have long loved spaces that are quiet and apart . . .” So begins Fran Taber’s Pendle Hill pamphlet on personal retreats, *Come Aside and Rest Awhile* (see note 1, bottom of article). I sank into the living room sofa and relaxed into the cushions as Fran described her awareness of how important it is to have time for “retirement,” away from the stimulation of everyday life. But before I finished the first page, my ten-year-old daughter called me from the kitchen, needing help with her project on Olympic figure skating champion, Sarah Hughes. After finding our hole punch and helping Katie create holes for a shoelace in her poster board skate, I returned to Fran’s words concerning the “deep hunger in religious circles ecumenically for a deeper experience of silence and solitude.” Before I could turn the page, Katie needed my help again. Over the course of an hour and a half, my reading of Fran’s pamphlet was interposed many times with the “stimulation of everyday life” as I leapt up to find a long-enough shoelace, shake a silver pen that wasn’t working and recommend alternatives, find a permanent marker, and give Katie heartfelt praise for a job well done. By the time the evening was over, I had read only ten pages. Life is good, in its fullness. Life with family, friends and work is rich and rewarding. Yet I, too, love “spaces that are quiet and apart,” and times for stillness, reflection and prayer. Is your life and longing similar?

In this brief article, I want to explore several questions: Why do people need retreats? What are some elements that are often part of a good retreat? What are the positive outcomes that people experience from a good retreat? But first, there’s an even more basic question: What is a retreat? And finally, given the busyness of our daily lives, how can we find the time for “retirement” that will really refresh us?

What is a retreat?

Within Quakerism, ‘retreat’ is used to refer to a broad spectrum of planned opportunities. A Friends meeting may have a day-long “retreat” at the meetinghouse to focus on a theme such as “deepening our spiritual lives,” and to strengthen the sense of community. Retreat centers have a variety of offerings, including the semi-silent, guided New Year’s retreat offered every year at Pendle Hill. Or an individual Friend may go off to a special location for a longer, private, silent retreat, with or without a spiritual director or guide. Some Friends have undertaken month-long retreats, often under the guidance of someone trained in this leadership in another religious tradition.

Common to all of these possibilities is the opportunity to withdraw from one’s daily life for the good of oneself as a spiritual being. Nancy Bieber of Lancaster (PA) Meeting writes, “A retreat . . . may include content and learning but its emphasis is on stepping away from one’s life for renewal of

spirit, engaging in a time of slowed down living for rest and refreshment, and creating space for spiritual listening” (*See note 2, bottom of article*). A different use of time is often part of the experience of retreat: a retreatant seeks to be present, here and now, rather than dwelling on the past or focusing on the future. A retreat is for being rather than for doing.

Why do we need retreats?

“In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength” (Isaiah 30:15, NRSV). Barbarajene Williams, who serves professionally as Spiritual Nurturer of staff at Pendle Hill, uses this quotation often in retreat leadership. In a recent conversation she noted three general reasons that we need retreats. First, she mentioned our need for discernment. When the rhythms of our lives seem to leave us in a rut, we need time and space to discern what we are to do. Second, she affirmed the human need for rest, for Sabbath time, for refreshment. Third (but not least), retreats are an answer to our need to deepen our life in the Spirit. “As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.” (Psalm 42:1-2, NRSV).

These three reasons are very close to those given by Nancy Bieber, who has led many retreats for Friends and other people of faith. She said recently, “We are human beings who are made to rest,” not just sleep at night. We need physical, spiritual and mental rest—time and space—the chance to take a break from our usual “goal directed” behavior. We need this rest repeatedly. We need time “just to be.” When we step back from our daily lives, we can see them from the outside and reflect on them. We get renewed in this space as we rest our “driving spirit” and listen to God. We “need to discern,” to “listen to God’s nudges” that can guide us in what we do. Jesus gave us a pattern of withdrawal, as for example in Matthew 14:23, when “. . . he went up to the mountain by himself to pray.” This withdrawal was followed by return to service again and again.

What are some elements of a good retreat?

Retreat leaders and participants frequently mention several factors. Time and space are key, including what Nancy Bieber calls “a sense of spaciousness.” This doesn’t have to mean a naturally beautiful setting (although that can help), but at least a “nurturing space.” It is useful to be in a setting different from one’s usual locations in order not to be distracted by what generally gets our attention. For overnight retreats it is good to have a room alone. It is also important to have a means of expressing outwardly what is going on inwardly. This could involve journaling; singing or other musical expression; art; dance, yoga, hiking or other movement, etc.

Many retreatants find it helpful to have a companion: a spiritual director or guide, although some Friends have benefited from totally private retreats. In group retreats, the participants can nurture each other deeply. If focus is needed, a theme may help, such as, “What is God calling us to do?” Candles and spiritually centering music are important for some retreatants.

Even more basic is our intention. Barbarajene Williams is clear that we “make” a retreat, which is different from “going on” or “taking” one. The retreatant is the co-creator of the retreat with God. We bring ourselves; we are present.

What are the positive outcomes of a retreat?

- “I am returning home with a renewed sense of God’s purpose and a peacefulness that was lacking in my life for some time.”
- “It gave me new tools to get in touch with life.”
- “This experience met my spiritual needs in ways I could not have imagined. Spirit most definitely was at work.”
- “At this time in my life I just needed space, and I had that in generous amounts.”
- “Mind-body-spirit refreshment. Thank you. Thanks be to God.”

These expressions come from participants in a variety of guided group retreats at Pendle Hill. Retreatants go home feeling restored and rested. Sometimes there is no dramatic change; perhaps a sense of being more oneself. Sometimes, however, even a brief retreat can be the setting for empowering insight and even transformation. The “fruits of the Spirit” may find well expression, as in a greater active caring for another person. As Barbarajene Williams notes, we often emerge more aware of God’s presence, already active in our lives.

How can we find time for “retirement?”

As an introvert who has recognized my spiritual needs for a long time, I’ve sought quiet places for years. But as a wife and mother who works full-time, I can’t just take off by myself very often. What I’ve found is that God has often felt present for me in the middle of my busyness. Thomas Kelly, in *A Testament of Devotion*, describes how it is possible to live on two levels at once, active in our everyday concerns and at the same time receptive to “divine breathings” (*see note 3, bottom of article*). In my experience, intention is important here. What matters is to want the presence and guidance of the Spirit, in and through and impacting what is happening during the day.

Yet longer times of “retirement” are invaluable. These include private times for prayer and reflection and meeting for worship. Then there are the many opportunities for longer retreats waiting for us when we are ready. If you feel tired, spiritually flagging or in need of discernment for your life, perhaps this is a call to “come aside and rest awhile,” to make time and space for yourself in a retreat.

Note 1: Taber, Frances, Irene, *Come Aside and Rest Awhile*, Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications, 1997, p. 3. **Note 2:** Bieber, Nancy, “Reflections on Retreats at Pendle Hill,” unpublished piece, November 4, 2002, p. 1. **Note 3 :** Kelly, Thomas, *A Testament of Devotion*, New York: Harper, 1941, p. 35.

Shirley Dodson is a member of Middletown Monthly Meeting, Lima, PA, and currently serves as Director of Conferences and Retreats at Pendle Hill, a Quaker center for study and contemplation in Wallingford, PA: www.pendlehill.org.

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