

Meeting God (Again) in Spiritual Retreat

BY JEANIE MILEY

Spiritual retreat equips the serious seeker of God to find God in daily life. We experience retreat in many ways. We give up grading how it went by our standards of evaluation and trust that our efforts will produce the fruit we need, perhaps not from our perspective, but from God's.

A friend asked, “You’re going on another retreat?” I nodded in the affirmative, trying not to feel guilty or self-indulgent. “Haven’t you retreated enough? When are you going to *advance*?”

It does not matter if I am going away on a retreat to fill my own cup or to facilitate a retreat for others, I return refreshed and restored. The power of retreat has been so important to me that I have come to understand that there is paradox in the experience: retreating *is* advancing.



Be still and know that I am God!

Psalm 46:10

I have facilitated many retreats for others, and I have attended many retreats as a pilgrim and participant. I have been in solitude and I have been in silence for eleven days on five different occasions with a group of people who were strangers to me at the beginning, but who became companions through the mystery of silence. I have been on retreats with much talking and activity, and I have been on retreats to learn how to be in the silence.

Often, a retreat is a chance to get away from routine and hear stimulating or inspirational speakers, get better acquainted with others in a relaxed environment, and participate in games and other forms of recreation. Some-

times, there is a campfire and perhaps a sing-along.

Those forms of retreats are still enjoyable and meaningful for me, but it was on a warm spring day at Wellspring, the retreat center sponsored by the Church of the Savior in Washington, DC, that a new dimension was added to the spiritual practice of retreat. There, gathered with about thirty other seekers, I experienced my first *silent retreat* for which the stated purpose was to *meet God* in the silence, and in those twenty-four hours, I found a resource and a practice for which I had been searching.

That particular retreat with its emphasis on the nurturing of the *inward journey* convinced me of the value and necessity of such retreats if I was going to be equipped for the demands and challenges of the *outward journey*. My religious heritage over-emphasized being busy for God and *doing*, and either neglected or minimized the practices of nourishing the kingdom within. That retreat at Wellspring introduced me to the contemplative life, and set me on a path that has been vital to my spiritual life and, in fact, to my general well-being.

That silent retreat introduced me to the practices that would make it more likely for me to be aware of God's presence. The orientation of the retreat showed me that a person could grow into expecting that meeting God in the everyday ordinary could become a natural part of one's everyday life.

Retreat provides the opportunity to draw apart, unplug, disconnect, and pause in order to advance in the personal quest to meet God and deepen the relationship with this Mystery. Taking the time to disengage from routine and participate in retreat provides inner resources that reprioritize the multiple quests of daily life.

Indeed, the idea of going away on a spiritual retreat is at odds with the American culture in which achieving, accomplishing, and acquiring are the rules of the road. We are formed in a culture that values results, instant gratification, and action. To ask ourselves to do the opposite—to practice ways of being in the world that ask us to slow down, take time for reflection, to do nothing but *be*—can be one of the most radically transforming and empowering things we can do. It can also cause discomfort for those whose days are shaped by the need to perform and produce, measure and count earnings and results, chart and graph progress.



I wish I had a lodging place in the desert
where I could spend some time like a weary traveler.

*Jeremiah 9:2 (NET)*¹

"I'm going on a silent retreat," a person with whom I do spiritual direction told me recently. She was excited about a week she had reserved for herself in a solitary cabin on a retreat site in south Texas. "What do I need to do to prepare myself?"

Instantly, my memory took me back to my first solitary retreat in the Quiet House at Laity Lodge in the Hill Country of Texas, where the words of the verse quoted above from Jeremiah were inscribed over the doorway. That longing of Jeremiah's for a place to be, to rest, to draw apart expressed precisely my feelings as I unloaded my car and prepared for a time when I *needed* to meet God in the silence. I was, in fact, hungry and thirsty for God's presence.

In the silence and solitude of a silent retreat, the committee that meets in our heads can be calmed down, allowing the possibility of hearing the whispers of God's grace. It is possible to get a new perspective on old problems and to see with clearer eyes.

I arrived tired and somewhat anxious about the experience of being disconnected from others, alone in a cabin out in what felt like a wilderness, but more, I was eager for what the days of solitude and silence might offer. I recalled pastor and theologian John Claypool's words as I reflected on what it is that motivates a person to withdraw from responsibilities and daily life to be still and quiet, seeking to engage with the Spirit of God.

"I have been beckoned forward toward the Mystery and pushed from within by my pain," Claypool once said to me, and perhaps that could be said about all who seek God.

Many things propel human beings to draw apart as a means of meeting God, and my experience is that it is in the silence that those "many things" become part of the agenda for a silent retreat. It is in the silence that we can hear the chatter in our own heads and sift and sort through the various pulls on our attentions and affections enough to finally be open more fully to the presence of the still, small voice of the Living God. In placing oneself in the atmosphere and attitude of meeting God, it is often possible to get a new perspective on old problems and to see with clearer eyes.

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On that day when my directee asked for direction for her retreat, I took a deep breath, praying to differentiate the need of this person before me and my own life experience. I knew the significance of this retreat and the sincerity of my directee's quest to meet God.

With thoughts from my lifetime of retreats whirling in my memory, I wanted to keep to one of my rules of the spiritual path: *keep it simple*.

"Take an open mind and an open heart," I told her. "If you want to state an intention of what you want from this time, do that, but don't be so attached to your idea of what God wants to do and how God might meet you there that you miss what God is trying to do in you."

"How should I plan my days?" she asked. "What should I take to read?"

Faced with five days of an open schedule, it is tempting to want to have a plan or a structure. After all, are we really worth anything if we are simply *being*? Such slaves to our schedules and our to-do lists, a blank calendar and a silent alarm clock can be anxiety-producing, but it can also be seen as a gift of pure grace.

"Take your journal and your Bible. Take a book if you want to read, but let the time unfold," I told her. "Practice being present to your own inner nudgings. Trust God enough to let him guide this time."

It is hard to slow down and just be when you have lived on the clock for so long, rushing to meet others' needs, deadlines, demands. It feels awkward to be going at a fast clip year after year and then, suddenly, to have the blessed space and time to slow down to a more graceful, natural pace and really see and hear and absorb nature's sounds and textures. It can be soothing, so that you feel you have finally found your own self again, or it can feel strange and even scary to be alone.

"I was so tired the first day that I just slept and walked and then slept some more," my friend told me when she returned, and I reminded her that sometimes the most spiritual thing we can do is take a nap.

Americans are, after all, sleep deprived. We are generally so overly stimulated almost all of the time, either by billboards, media and computers, or television and telephones that when we are in a quiet place with no demands on our time or attention, we can finally relax and sleep.

On that first silent retreat at Wellspring, we were given the following prayer to take with us into the silence. From that first twenty-four hours of silence until today, this prayer has been part of my daily practice. I have surrendered many things into the hands and heart of God, including my stubborn will, complicated problems and hard decisions, relationships and writing projects, my deepest fears and the coming hours of a day or a retreat. This is the prayer that affirms my intention to be present to God with an open mind and an open heart.

Prayer of Abandonment

Father,

I abandon myself into your hands;
do with me what you will.

Whatever you may do, I thank you:
I am ready for all, I accept all.

Let only your will be done in me,
and in all your creatures—
I wish no more than this, O Lord.

Into your hands I commend my soul:
I offer it to you with all the love of my heart,
for I love you, Lord, and so need to give myself,
to surrender myself into your hands without reserve,
and with boundless confidence,
for you are my Father.²

“Take this prayer with you into your retreat,” I told my friend. “Surrender the time into God’s hands. Allow yourself to be led by him. Relax into his presence.”

As I had done, my friend carefully wrote down the suggestions I gave her, but I reminded her that the Holy Spirit is the real director.

“By the way, take your knitting and your walking shoes,” I told my friend as she left our meeting place to travel to her small cottage at the retreat center.

Both meditative walking and the repetitive movements of needlepoint have come to be important components of a meaningful personal retreat for me. These and other physical activities somehow free the brain from its attachment to rational, logical ruminations and incessant planning, analyzing, and critiquing, and engage the more intuitive, creative, spontaneous part of the brain. Physical activity, too, can free the mind to accept the wisdom of the body, which always has much to say.

“Be aware of your first waking thoughts, too,” I told her, “for that is when the ego has not yet assumed its sentinel’s position. God can more easily speak in those tender waking moments when we are not so defended. And pay attention to your dreams.”



Draw near to God and he will draw near to you.

James 4:8a

Memories of the richness of my years of retreat came rushing back to me as I reflected on that session with this directee who is so much more than a directee. We are companions on the path of seeking God.

I could hardly wait to hear her report at our next session because I was confident that with her sincerity and openness to what I call “dancing with God,” she would have much to report.

While it is good to have a stated intention of meeting God on retreat, it is important to hold that intention with a light touch. One should not be overly anxious about when God might show up and how, and while an ecstatic experience might be wonderful, putting God to the test of how and when

and what he might do boxes God in and reveals our own need to control.

You may not sense that anything is “happening” for you while you are on your retreat. You may even feel frustrated that it seems that nothing is happening, but what’s happening is not the point of a retreat.

If you have the desire to meet God in the time you have drawn apart to be with him, then trust that God knows that desire and relax into the rhythm of the time you have. God works best, it seems, at the unseen level, and you may not realize the benefit of the time you have spent until later and in daily life. You may get an insight or a revelation out of the blue weeks or even months later. The important thing is that you have made the effort to draw apart for the purpose of meeting God, and when you have done that, you can trust the process.

Solitude is a profound spiritual practice, so important that teachers in the worlds of spiritual formation and the contemplative life teach that the person who cannot be in solitude cannot fully be in community, and that those who cannot be in community cannot be in solitude. It seems that there is a correlation between being comfortable alone with God and yourself and being involved in a healthy way in a community.

At the same time I was being introduced to the practice of solitude, I also had the privilege of experiencing retreats with the adults in my church family. Drawing apart for a weekend together, listening to inspiring speakers, and sharing fun times on the Frio River or around a campfire gave us an opportunity to know each other in different settings. There were many other retreats I attended in which people gathered from far-away places to learn more about what it meant to be a follower of Christ within the context of contemporary society. I attended several retreats in which there was time for speakers to teach, time for the group members to process the lectures together in small groups, and time for rest and recreation in nature, and opportunities to experience the silence together.

Retreats that offer opportunities for drawing apart together and with the stated intention of spiritual growth build a sense of what it means to work together and support each other in the challenges of understanding and living the Christian life.

Poet Robert Browning said that “God uses us to help each other so, lending our minds out,”³ and on retreats such as these group retreats, I found that principle to be profoundly helpful in my own quest to under-

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stand this mystery we call God. Hearing the wisdom and knowledge of teachers has the possibility of stretching our minds, even when we hear something that makes us uncomfortable. Even when we disagree, there is something important that happens when we sit in a small group and discuss the discomfort with others because the intention is not to prove who is right or wrong, but to discover how God might be working to show us something

new.

In recent years I have heard about more churches and groups that attend family retreats, and I am sold on that idea. It is also possible to set aside time on family vacations to orient children toward the idea of meeting God.

Shared community on retreats provides the opportunity to meet God in each other, to see each other with increased understanding and, hopefully, compassion. Drawing near to God together happens when we are rafting down the river, sharing meals together, and watching the stars light up the sky. In a myriad of ways we lend not only our minds out to each other, but our hearts

and our hands, our shared quests for God, and the moments when God met us with his love.

For our group, the lessons in country western dance on a Saturday night went a long way in building community within our church family. God likes fun, you know.

In recent years I have heard about more churches and groups that attend family retreats, and I am sold on that idea. For families to draw apart from weekly schedules in which adults and children alike are constantly on the go for the stated purpose of being with other seekers of God has to be one of the great ideas of this season. It is invaluable for children of all ages to gather at a place where fun is provided in age-appropriate activities, to meet together in large groups for worship, and to see each other in relaxed settings, seeking a more meaningful relationship with God.

It is also possible to set aside time on family vacations to orient children toward the idea of meeting God. When our three daughters were young, we vacationed every summer in Lake City, Colorado. Away from the routine on a Sunday morning, I was nevertheless thinking about a series of family worship ideas for an article I was writing for our denomination's magazine for parents of young children. My husband and I decided to practice what I was thinking about with our children and see if it worked, and so on a Sunday morning, we decided to take a Jeep trip into the high country and focus on how God reveals himself in nature. "Today as we hike and picnic," we told our girls, "look for some way that God might speak to you in nature."

Our four-year-old Amy had a small bucket with her, and throughout the day, she filled that bucket with small rocks and pebbles from the streams and walking paths. Her pursuit of the perfect stones was diligent and focused as she trudged up and down the mountain trails with us. That night after dinner, each of us was to share our stories of meeting God in nature with each other, and Amy was prepared with her bucket of stones. We thought she would have one thing to say about meeting God in the rocks, but one by one she pulled each little rock out and set it on the table, telling how she had experienced something about God's love or his beauty in each one.

Finally, the other two girls became impatient, and all of us began to see that this could go on for a very long time because Amy had collected a lot of evidence that God was present with her on those mountain paths! Unfortunately, her big sisters began to giggle and, of course, that produced tears from Amy whose heart and intention was so sincere that all I could see was God manifesting himself in her purity of heart.

We tell that story often when we are together, now that the girls are adults, and we love to tell it to our children's children now when we gather together in Lake City. We tell that story to remind ourselves of how God has been present to us as we have sought to meet him in our labor and our play, in nature and in great spiritual writings, in music and art, architecture and literature, and most of all, in each other.

Meeting God in retreat with the focused intention and stated purpose of nurturing the daily practice of the presence of God has a way of preparing our minds and hearts to be open to experiencing God in the ordinary, the mundane, and even the difficult and tragic. Spiritual retreat is a deeply focused experience that equips the serious seeker of God to find God in daily life.

We prepare for retreat by simply opening our minds and hearts to the desire to meet God. We experience the retreat in as many ways as there are people, I suppose, and we give up grading how it went by our standards of evaluation and simply trust that our efforts will produce the fruit that we need, perhaps not from our perspective, but from God's.

Thomas Merton's prayer helps me keep my perspective, whether I am on retreat or engaged in running my world.

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope that I have that desire in all that I do. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire, and I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore I will trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow

of death. I will not fear you, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.⁴

As I reflect back on the richness of spiritual retreats, I have to smile about how it is that sometimes a bucket of rocks and a rocky path have been the very gifts I have needed to free me to meet God again in a brand new way.

NOTES

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2 This is an interpretation by Charles de Foucauld (1858-1916) of Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. "This was the last prayer of our Master, our Beloved," de Foucauld writes in introduction of the prayer. "And may it be not only that of our last moment, but also that of our every moment." See *Charles de Foucauld, Modern Spiritual Masters*, edited by Robert Ellsberg (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 104.

3 Robert Browning, "Fra Lippo Lippi," lines 305-306, in *Robert Browning: Selected Poems*, Penguin Classics, edited by Daniel Karlin (London, UK: Penguin Books, 2001), 70.

4 Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999 [1956]), 79.



JEANIE MILEY

is an author and retreat leader in Houston, Texas.