

# Steps toward solitude

by [Debra Bendis](#) in the [May 29, 2013](#) issue



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Read Sara Maitland's article on [the perils of silence](#).

Several times a year, when I find myself yearning for solitude, I schedule three or four days at a retreat center several hours from home. Invariably, after I've made arrangements I begin to have second thoughts. Suddenly home seems especially appealing. Why leave the garden in summer? Why leave the warm haven of home in winter? Why miss a slow weekend breakfast with my husband? Why take so much time away from work? But I always push through my hesitations and make it out the door. Then, as soon as I'm on the road, a sense of anticipation takes over. By the time I pull into the retreat center, I'm thrilled to be there and to have time away.

Upon arrival, I don't settle automatically into the silence of solitude. At first the silence can be as startling as noise. It takes hours, even a full day, before I let go of the habit of experiencing life as a chain of activities lived within the press of a schedule. I'm used to checking up on loved ones each day, for example, or having them check on me. I'm used to working through a "to do" list, one with priority items flashing red. I'm used to perceiving my life as moving somewhere and accomplishing (or failing to accomplish) something. When I'm suddenly alone with myself, with nothing to do but observe what's happening around me, I feel a moment of panic. I'm not sure I want this absence of noise—either the quiet in my head or in the world around me. I know that emotions I've stored up—sadness, anger, regret—may catch up with me and overwhelm me. Sometimes the emotions that surface are surprising.

I don't try to force myself into silence. If I'm restless, I do some handwork, work on a crossword puzzle or do some light reading. I try not to leave the retreat center for a diversion. With time, I've learned to resist getting in a car and going somewhere, and instead I walk to see the herons at the pond and call it exercise; I make a cup of tea instead of buying a cappuccino; I take my camera outside as a way to look more slowly and closely at the world.

At some point, usually when I'm appreciating the prairie cornflowers in bloom or watching an owl resting on a high branch, I suddenly feel as if I've climbed into the wardrobe of the Narnia tales: I've been removed from the familiar and transported somewhere else, to a place where I am only a small part of the play. The larger life of nature takes on the main role in a major production with a changing palette of color. This is a sweet, cherished moment. It's then I know why I've come.

If the weather is good, I spend a lot of time sitting on a bench. If it's cold or rainy, I watch the sky from inside. I lose track of time as I sketch or write or observe wild turkeys or deer. I find that I can choose what to think about instead of having concerns or ideas choose me. I can work through a question or a choice. Or I can just rest and let the time be a kind of prayer. At some point I realize that a space has opened up in me, that something has displaced my fears and restlessness. I'm freed from spinning and unproductive thoughts, freed from obsessions, plans, and regrets.

Over the years I've learned some strategies for taking a solitary retreat. At first, when I was unsure about going away for any length of time, I found renewal by setting aside a morning or afternoon for a walk through a park or for sitting in a café or library. In any setting, retreating from technology is important. When on retreat I choose a room where there is no wireless and leave my phone in the car, so that I'm less tempted to check them frequently.

As I'm in a monastery setting, I usually attend worship once or several times a day. This is a wonderful way to center a day, although sometimes I realize that I'm attending worship just because it's one more thing to do; when that happens, I may stay put in my solitude the next time the bell signals worship. When walking, I make a note to forget the commuter's rush hour pace and amble, stopping often to look or sit or both.

When my time on retreat is over, I'm comfortable with silence. Now it's the sound of the car radio that makes me jump, and everything that waits at home comes rushing toward me. But I return with a reservoir of serenity, one that I try to refill as often as

I can.