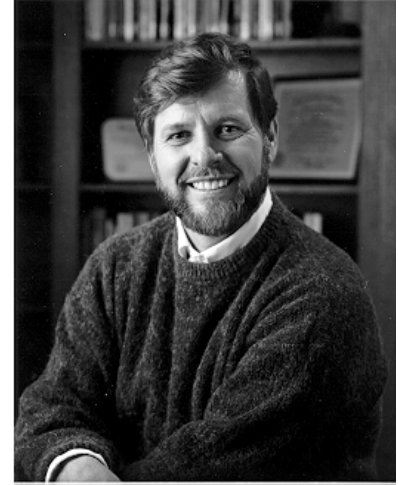


Growing Edges

April 1997

As I begin writing this quarterly letter, I have just returned from meeting with a highly effective pastor in our area who is planning an extended period of personal retreat for his own spiritual nurture. During our conversation, he said to me, "The greatest gift I can give my people is to become a pastor who has grown deep in the things of God." Wise pastor! And rare.

This prompted me to think about why we shy away from experiences of solitude even though they were absolutely axiomatic to the figures that walk across the pages of our Bible and to the great leaders of all our traditions. I am not thinking about the normal excuses we give for neglecting times of personal retreat: overcrowded schedules, demanding responsibilities, numerous obligations, constant deadlines, and more. While these things do need to be dealt with, they are only surface matters.



The Root of Our Fear

No, I am concerned about a deeper reason that invariably crops up any time we consider times of genuine solitude. It is the almost overwhelming feeling that we will be passed over. Now, what we say is, "I want to be available to help whenever there is a crisis or problem." But what really concerns us is that people will get along quite well without us! You see, this strikes right at the root of our fear of becoming unimportant, unneeded, insignificant, useless.

This is precisely why solitude is such a fundamental discipline of the spiritual life. As long as we are at the center of the action, we feel indispensable. And we are sorely tempted to micro-manage everyone around us . . . for their good, of course! But genuine experiences of solitude undercut all the pretense. In the very act of retreat we resign as CEO of the universe. We entrust people into the hands of God. We allow others to develop and grow without our constant oversight. This, in time, gives us a precious freedom when we are among people—the freedom to serve and be served without the slightest need to manage or control either people or circumstances.

Rendering Ourselves Useless

Besides, it isn't all that bad to become useless. Good teachers hope in time to make themselves useless to those under their tutelage. Students unable to think for themselves and thus forever dependent upon their teachers have not been taught well. Parents are exceedingly useful to young children. But good parents are constantly working to make themselves useless as they nurture a growing self-government in their children. Perpetual dependency in a daughter or son is a grotesque thing indeed.

An old writer, Henry Clay Trumbull, once said, "There are ever two ways of striving to fill one's place in the world: one is by seeking to prove one's self useful; the other, by striving to render one's self useless. The first way is the commoner and the more attractive; the second is the rarer and the more noble." Regular experiences of spiritual retreat and genuine solitude will empower us and give us the perspective necessary to render ourselves useless.

Peace and joy,

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read "Richard J. Foster". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Richard J. Foster

Growing Together

By now you may have guessed that the theme of this *Perspective* issue is personal retreat. We do this in part to showcase the wonderful new RENOVARÉ Resource by Emilie Griffin, *Wilderness Time*, featured on page five. But we are after more than the promotion of a book. All of us committed to the RENOVARÉ vision are seeking to integrate times of solitude and retreat into our personal lives, and (given our world and its reigning values) we need all the encouragement and help we can get in this matter. So, in this page devoted to practice, let me suggest some of the varied venues for solitude that are within the reach of everyone.

- **Take a pre-dawn walk.**

Listen to the awakening sounds of your world, whether city or country. Give the coming day to God. Listen for his guidance over the labor of the day. It is an ancient discipline to welcome the new day in faith and worship. "O Lord, in the morning thou dost hear my voice; in the morning I prepare a sacrifice for thee, and watch" (Ps. 5:3). "And in the morning, a great while before day, he [Jesus] rose and went out to a lonely place, and there he prayed" (Mark 2:35). In the words of the old German hymn, "When morning gilds the skies, My heart awaking cries, May Jesus Christ be praised!"

- **For one month leave your car radio off and turn your morning commute into a mini-retreat.**

Place your children and spouse into the loving care of God. Pray for the person in the car ahead of you. Consider the lilies of the field and how they differ from the frantic scramble of human activity around you. Try driving in the slow lane for a change. Bless those who cut in front of you; bless and do not curse them. Listen for divine impressions on upcoming meetings, relationships in the office, creative solutions to troubling business situations, and more.

- **In the middle of the morning or afternoon, take a five minute worship break.**

Enjoy a fresh-cut flower on your desk or a tranquil picture or saying on the wall. Stroll around the office building (or home or field or school), prayerfully placing every person who works there into the strong, protective arms of God. Tap your toe or finger to the tune of a

simple worship song. Enjoy a fresh cup of coffee and with every sip ask for the inflow of God's warmth.

- **Limit your speech to an absolute minimum for one day.**

See what you learn about yourself; for example, how frantically you depend upon words to manipulate situations. Watch for how words bless and encourage, and how they wound and destroy. For the future consider ways that your words can be few and full.

- **Read one chapter of a devotional classic as the children are taking a nap.**

While pondering the reading, savor the "aloneness" and silence.

- **Go to the inner city for a social justice retreat.**

Talk with the homeless, learning *from* them rather than preaching *to* them. Fast so that in a small way you may enter into the gnawing hunger of those who live an eternal, compulsory fast. Walk the streets, listening to the whimpering "songs from the slums." Consider what it would mean to live without hope. Without trying to solve every problem, listen for any divine guidance you may be given for action.

- **Make your next plane flight or bus trip a personal retreat.**

Watch people. Listen. Pray. Read through a good book in one sitting.

- **Have an experience of "watching".**

Arise at 2:00 a.m., light a single candle as a reminder of the presence of Christ, and for one hour listen to the sounds of the night. Don't try to read or write. This is a time for silence, for stillness. Don't even try to pray in the normal sense of talking or articulating thoughts. Be quiet. Enter the Shalom of God. After the hour, return to bed and to sleep, remembering the words of Brother Lawrence; "those who have the gale of the Holy Spirit go forward even in sleep."

- **Leave radio, TV, stereo, CD off while cleaning the house or basement or garage or working on a hobby.**

View this time of quiet as a special gift from God during which you can listen for his whisperings.

Richard J. Foster

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An annual, tax deductible gift of \$15.00 is welcome to help cover publishing expenses. If you cannot help, we understand. Some will be able to give more and in this way the unity of the Body of Christ will be maintained.

An Invitation by Emilie Griffin

Times come when we yearn for more of God than our schedules will allow. We are tired, we are crushed, we are crowded by friends and acquaintances, commitments and obligations. The life of grace is abounding, but we are too busy for it! Even good obligations begin to hem us in.

Madeleine L'Engle writes: "Every so often I need OUT; something will throw me into total disproportion, and I have to get away from everybody—away from all those people I love most in the world—in order to regain a sense of proportion."¹

Often, she says, she needs to get away completely, to her special place, a small brook in a green glade.

Like her, we wish for the kind of freedom we had as children, a carefree spirit, a jubilant heart. Refreshment is what we're after: playfulness, simplicity, a clear space, a time in the wilderness. In Hosea we read:

Therefore, I will now allure her,
and bring her into the wilderness,
and speak tenderly to her,
From there I will give her her vineyards,
and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope.
There she shall respond as in the days of her youth,
as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt.
(Hos. 2:14–15)

A separate time with God has powerful appeal. We long for time in the open with wildflowers blowing and blue sky stretching overhead, with birds calling and green trees sighing. We may wonder, is such a gifted time stored up for us anywhere?

In the country of God's affections, such a time and space are ours for the asking. God is waiting for us, expecting us, offering us a time of restoration. What we're looking for goes by the simple name: *retreat*.

There may, however, be something in us that resists or holds back from the experience of retreat. We may schedule the retreat, and then balk at it or stall in some way. These fearful, self-deceiving impulses are what sometimes keep us from prayer; we need to break away from such constraints and begin.

Spiritual formation involves a fundamental choice. Choosing to live for Jesus Christ may mean adopting a certain style of life, or, perhaps more properly, a rule of

life. We take on a series of spiritual practices that will open us to God's work in our lives.

This choice leads to dialogue with God; warms our hearts for friendship with him. Retreat offers the chance for a fresh start in the spiritual life. No doubt, if you are ready to make a retreat, you have made such a start once before, possibly more than once.

This need to begin and begin again is universal; it is basic to the disciplined life. In his sermon entitled "Christian Repentance," John Henry Newman writes, "The most perfect Christian is to himself but a beginner, a penitent prodigal, who has squandered God's gifts. . . ."²

Perseverance is needed to live out our fundamental commitment: to serve God, not randomly but over the long run. Not unlike a marriage or a religious vocation, this way of life is transforming; it *will* change us. Over and over we must make clean breaks, fresh starts, and new beginnings.

The philosopher Søren Kierkegaard wrote a long treatise titled *Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing*. His notion of single-heartedness is a clue to the decisive nature of the spiritual life. To will one thing is to will over and over, beginning again and again, cutting loose from our past selves and stepping into the new drama of self-giving that is the disciplined life. Closer in time to us, the pastor and writer Eugene Peterson has written a book with a title that is a splendid metaphor of the spiritual life: *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*.

As Paul the Apostle has it, we are running a race. We are taking on a kind of training that will shape us into the image of Christ. Retreat, which could be called a decisive moment extended in time, offers us a great opportunity to seek this kind of formation. We are choosing a specific opportunity for grace, a disciplined way that will give us direction. Yet this choice is realistic, not so outrageous or mock-heroic that we can't accomplish it. Retreat is a general commitment to friendship with God: one that, despite false starts, stumbling, and all the different aspects of our humanity, will nevertheless act, by grace, to form us in Jesus Christ.

Think of the spiritual life as a pattern, a series of concrete actions that will gently move us toward transformation in Christ. The disciplines themselves, however, are not transformative. The transformation in us is God's work. It is a work of grace.

That deeply transformative grace comes to us not through our own doing but as pure gift. And yet something is demanded from us: the free gift of ourselves, our submission to the gentle rod of Christian discipline, our willingness to be transformed, our yielding to the grace of God. In the end our *yes* is what's required. We have to say, "Speak, Lord, your servant is listening." We have to say, "Be it done to me according to your will."

Is it hard to set aside time for retreat? Sometimes it seems impossible. Yet how many hours, even days, do we spend in the company of tiresome people, people who wear us down? How much time do we spend searching for effectiveness? For ways to manage our time? How much time do we spend worrying about things beyond our control?

Jesus deals with this overconcern. "And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? If then you are not able to do so small a thing as that, why do you worry about the rest?" (Luke 12:25–26).

Finding time for retreat is as difficult as finding time for prayer in an ordinary, overscheduled day. Whether the time be days or minutes, the issues are the same. Is retreat one of our priorities? Does God have a place in our scheme? How far we have allowed ourselves to slide! How distant we feel from the spirit of prayer! Possibly the barrier is not time at all. What we are up against is not really the pressure of events, not the many demands on our time, but a stubbornness within ourselves, a hard-heartedness that will not yield to transformation and change.

Setting aside a morning, a day, even a week or more for spiritual retreat is one of the most strengthening and reinforcing experiences of our lives. We need to yield. We have to bend. Once we embrace the spiritual disciplines, we are carried along, often, by a storm of grace. Giving way to the power of spiritual disciplines becomes a step toward freedom, a movement into the wide-open spaces of the sons and daughters of God.

Retreat—with all of its prayerful beginnings and renewals—can become a step into reality. On retreat we may discover our true identity not from any self-analysis but by God's gift of enlightenment.

The spiritual disciplines are ways to truth, stepping stones from our furious activity into God's calm and peace. When we have crossed over on the stepping stones, we escape into the life of grace. Then and there it is the Lord who teaches us. The power of God is leading us. Soon we hardly know where God leaves off and we begin.

How to Use *Wilderness Time*

This book raises and answers practical questions, yet the aim is not practicality as such but rather personal transformation in Christ. Hope of such transformation moves us into a place apart, a time of prayerful separation from daily pressures and cares. Transformation is God's doing—not ours—yet it happens because we choose it, in this instance by going apart for reflection and prayer.

People sometimes suppose that a special reason is needed to justify making a retreat. We assume that a retreat needs to be made on a certain occasion. In fact, no more reason is needed than that your heart longs for greater closeness with God—because you are worn out by many annoyances and worries, and you are seeking the refreshment of God's presence; because you need rest from the anxieties of ordinary living, even from the legitimate responsibilities imposed by family, work, and church; because you want to follow the example of Jesus in going apart to pray.

There are many different ways to make a retreat, but this guide will emphasize the creative process of making a private retreat according to your own design.

The approach will be contemporary, Christian, and biblical, imitating Jesus and his followers and being guided by their clearly established practices of going apart to pray. We also will draw on recent sources, suggesting readings from contemporary as well as ancient writers.

1. Madeleine L'Engle, *A Circle of Quiet* (New York: Seabury, 1972), 4.
2. John Henry Newman, *Parochial and Plain Sermons* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1987), 538.

Excerpted from chapter one of *Wilderness Time* (San Francisco: HarperCollinsSanFrancisco, 1997).



Emilie Griffin has written five other books on the spiritual life: *Chasing the Kingdom*, *Clinging*, *Turning*, *The Reflective Executive*, and *Homeward Voyage*. Now a free-lance marketing consultant, she and her husband, Bill, live in New Orleans.

Going Deeper

I rejoice in *Wilderness Time*. It is an invitation to retreat that truly invites. It welcomes me, entreats me, draws me into “the country of God’s affections,” as Emilie Griffin puts it.

It invites, first of all, because its author is writing from lived experience. She has taken retreat, not just once, or now and again, but as a firm pattern of life. And she does this out of the context of the busy, pressured life of an advertising executive, first in New York City and now in New Orleans.

Wilderness Time also invites because it is doable. No spiritual heroics here. It takes me by the hand and shows me how I can actually integrate this way of living into *my* life and *my* schedule.

It is not that it pampers my obsession with muchness and manyness. To the contrary. Ms. Griffin writes, “When there is no time to do it, that’s when you most need to unclutter the calendar and go apart to pray. When the gridlock of your schedule relentlessly forbids it is the time you most need retreat.”

Then, too, it invites by encouraging me to follow “the leading-strings of God’s grace.” I like that. Oh,

there are plenty of practical suggestions here. It even gives guidance for one-day, three-day, and seven-day retreats. But regardless of how much we may plan our retreat—and there are generous planning ideas here—God is in charge of the retreat experience and we are not. This reality Emilie calls “God’s improvisations.” She writes, “You can never fully anticipate God’s gifts to you in the retreat. . . . There is no way to orchestrate the black-eyed Susans growing wild in the path as you turn the corner with your Bible in hand.”

And finally, it invites me because it calls me home. Home to peace and serenity and affirmation. Home to hope and friendship and openness. Home to acceptance and intimacy and joy. Home, home to God. It is as if buried deep in the human heart is a long-

forgotten dream of “the beloved country” and *Wilderness Time* is calling me to remember once again. And so, I do.

I urge you to buy, use, and wear out *Wilderness Time*.

Richard J. Foster
23 October 1996

(Excerpted from the foreword to *Wilderness Time*.)

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