

# Why make a retreat?

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FOR TWENTY-FIVE YEARS I HAVE LED or directed a variety of new forms of retreat including personally directed retreats, holistic retreats, art and contemplation retreats, and men's retreats. The primary focus of all these retreats has been the personal religious experience of the retreatants. Input from myself or other members of a retreat team was usually brief and its intent was to deepen awareness of the interior process of the retreatants. Most of these retreats also incorporated meditation, art, poetry, body movement and small group sharing to some degree or another. At the beginning of these retreats I regularly asked the question, 'Why have you come? What desire drew you to this retreat?' The responses have been incredibly diverse, rooted in each person's unique life experience, often deeply moving and usually revised as the retreat itself unfolded. This experience has led me to conclude that the question of why people seek out new forms of retreat does not lend itself to the type of answers that can be objectively determined through a sociological survey. The motives expressed by retreatants touch directly on the mysterious intersection of God's grace and human freedom, conscious and unconscious desire, our longing for God and God's longing for us. However, if I had to distil into a single sentence the essential factors that draw people to seek out new forms of retreat I would express it like this. People make retreats because they are impelled by reasons of the heart to withdraw from 'the world' in search of the Mystery at the depth of human experience for the sake of a changed heart and a changed world. Each phrase of this somewhat awkward sentence provides a viewpoint on the motives and mysteries behind why people make retreats today. The remainder of this article will briefly explore these viewpoints.

## *Impelled by reasons of the heart*

Pascal's observation that 'the heart has reasons that reason does not know'<sup>1</sup> is a reminder that the reasons of the heart that draw or impel people to make a retreat are rarely fully conscious and sometimes in conflict with the reasons formulated by the mind. For example, a busy, middle-aged professional woman and mother of two children decides to make a weekend retreat to get away from the stresses of work and

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family and find some rest and peace in a beautiful setting. Yet her heart has other plans. The retreat turns out to be far from a quiet weekend away. Troubling needs, desires and feelings of unlived life that this woman has buried beneath her busyness for years surface powerfully on the retreat. The woman leaves the weekend shaken and full of questions but with hope that if she remains faithful to the interior process begun on the retreat she may eventually find a peace deeper than she had imagined possible. Or consider a young man in his late twenties who comes to a personally directed retreat embroiled in a difficult intimate relationship. His stated reason for coming on retreat is to pray about and 'work on the relationship'. However, he discovers to his complete surprise that his preoccupation with the relationship dissolves when a profound and unexpected experience of God's love floods his heart on the fourth day of the retreat. The relationship issues are completely reconfigured within a new context of love and freedom he could not have anticipated when the retreat began. Though the disjuncture between the reasons of the heart and the mind is not always as dramatic as that described in these examples, retreatants commonly report that they are surprised, amused, troubled, grateful and occasionally deeply shocked by what emerges during the course of a retreat. Often by the end of the retreat they have a deeper and quite different understanding of the real reasons, the heart's reasons, that impelled them to make a retreat.

If the elusive reasons of the heart are acknowledged as a significant motivating factor, it is clear that individuals do not simply *decide* to make a retreat. They are, whether they are fully conscious of it or not, *responding* to a mysterious invitation of grace experienced in and through the desires of their hearts. A restlessness or longing at deep affective levels precedes the conscious reasoning process of the mind. New forms of retreat that acknowledge and attend to the affective dimension of personal religious experience are attractive to retreatants who have discovered the powerful spiritual movements that can occur at the deeper levels of their being. Retreatants are drawn to the supportive atmosphere, flexible structures and personal guidance in exploring the deep desires of their hearts that these retreats commonly provide.

### *To withdraw from 'the world'*

Another frequently expressed reason for making a retreat is the desire to withdraw temporarily from one's ordinary routines, responsibilities and familiar surroundings. A retreat may involve actually

spending a day, a weekend or several days at a location away from home. However, the growth in popularity of the nineteenth annotation retreat in which the Spiritual Exercises are experienced in the midst of daily life makes clear that the withdrawal implied in the word 'retreat' may simply consist in setting aside time each day to pray while remaining engaged in one's normal activities. For most contemporary Christians the traditional notion of 'withdrawing from the world' carries connotations of contempt for the body and sexuality as well as a devaluation of the interpersonal, social and historical dimensions of faith. These negative associations clash with the emphasis on the goodness of creation and the body as well as the imperative to transform social structures that are so pervasive in recent Christian spirituality. In the present context 'withdrawal from the world' as a motive for retreat can sound like an escapist flight from genuine engagement with life.

Though most retreatants who seek out new forms of retreat would not describe their motivation in such traditional terms, they do speak about the need to get away from certain aspects of contemporary culture that threaten to stifle or constrict their spirits. For example, many will lament with distress the lack of free, unstructured time in their lives. They will speak of a desire to slow down and step back from the relentless pressures of work and family life. Some will talk about the need for a respite from the constant noise, physical stress or superficial social interactions that pervade their lives. Others speak of a lack of depth and vitality in personal prayer or parish liturgies. Still others describe how they are caught in patterns of compulsive activity or addictive habits that leave them empty, anxious and dissatisfied. These descriptions of what contemporary retreatants wish to leave behind as they begin a retreat are remarkably close to the authentic meaning of 'the world' from a spiritual perspective. Aldous Huxley dusts off this seemingly outdated concept and presents it in a fresh way that can help to clarify another of the significant reasons why people make retreats.

'The world' is man's [*sic*] experience as it appears to, and is molded by his ego. It is that less abundant life which is lived according to the dictates of the insulated self. It is nature denatured by the distorted spectacles of our appetites and revulsions. It is the finite divorced from the Eternal. It is multiplicity in isolation from its non-dual Ground. It is time apprehended as one damned thing after another. It is a system of verbal categories taking the place of the fathomlessly beautiful and

mysterious particulars which constitute reality. It is a notion labeled 'God'. It is the Universe equated with the words of our utilitarian vocabulary.<sup>2</sup>

Huxley's words make clear that withdrawal from 'the world' does not imply a denigration of the body, nature or human relationship. The world consists of the ego-shaped mental filters or conditioned habits of perception that alienate us from our true selves, nature, other human beings and God. The world is a way of seeing, feeling and experiencing life in a less abundant way. One of the fundamental purposes of a retreat is to become aware of how one has internalized the half-truths, twisted values, emotional numbness, frantic pace and compulsive patterns of behaviour of the surrounding culture. A retreat provides the opportunity to withdraw for a time from these attitudes and patterns so that they can be recognized, named and released. If understood in this way, withdrawal from the world remains an important motivation for making a retreat.

### *In search of the Mystery*

Individuals choose to make new forms of retreat because they seek to experience the *mystery* of God behind the label 'God'. They are generally *not* seeking the certainty of clear answers, especially someone else's answers, or the confirmation of group identity through engaging in traditional religious devotions in common. In fact, many who are drawn to new styles of retreat find themselves in sympathy with Jung's statement that 'one of the main functions of formalized religion is to protect people against a direct experience of God'.<sup>3</sup> Retreats are seen as an opportunity to move beyond the protective use of religious symbols as a source of personal security for the ego or as a totem that defines an exclusive social group. Retreats are a time to let God out of the box of traditional categories. Put another way, many retreatants today hunger for the living Mystery that lies both deep within and beyond words, images, symbols and ritual forms.

Some people search for the Mystery-beyond-forms in retreats that emphasize silence and transcendence of images and forms in which they can expose their consciousness to the undefined and indefinable. Centring prayer retreats and meditation retreats that incorporate Eastern forms of spiritual practice are examples of new retreat forms that appeal to people interested in opening to inner silence and darkness with the hope of meeting the mystery of God there.

The same thirst for Mystery attracts others to retreats which incorporate visual art, poetry, music, movement and dance. These aesthetic modes allude or point to the mystery of God while at the same time allowing that mystery to remain largely hidden and undefined. Retreats that engage participants in drawing, painting, work with clay, body movement, drama and ritual often encourage retreatants to search for and express new symbols for God that emerge from their own unique religious experience. In an age when formalized religion obscures the Mystery and protects against the direct experience of God for many people, there is a need for individuals and groups to withdraw into the depths and discover new forms. These artistically oriented retreats often emphasize that the act of creation itself has revelatory significance. It is not so much the finished image, poem or ritual that evokes the Sacred as the unfolding process of inspiration and artistic expression that led to it. The creative process itself becomes the medium in which the Mystery is experienced.

### *At the depth of human experience*

Many of those who seek out new forms of retreat have an intuitive sense that their hunger for the transcendent God needs to be firmly grounded in the realities of human experience. They choose to retreat temporarily from their daily life, however briefly, so that they can become more aware and responsive to God at the depth of their experience. The retreat is not seen as a flight from the reality of everyday life but rather a movement deeper into it. In response to this need to connect spirituality with human experience a variety of new forms of retreat have emerged. For example, at Mercy Center, where I currently work, retreats and programmes are regularly offered that focus on finding God in the workplace, in intimate relationships, in bodily experience, in dreams, in times of grief, in struggles with addiction, in action for structural change. The implicit assumption of these retreats is that God is already present and at work in the depths of our bodily life and psychic life, our relationships and work involvements, our social institutions and cultural movements. The purpose of these retreats is to explore ways to listen contemplatively to one's ordinary human experience until its hidden depths reveal themselves.

People who are drawn to such retreats are often seeking a safe, supportive spiritual community in which they can be themselves and explore their experiences without fear of judgement. At a recent men's retreat I began with the usual question, 'What drew you to this retreat?' Several men responded that it was not the theme of the retreat that drew

them, but the chance to share with other men in an honest, open and caring way. They came for the depth and quality of the conversations and the silences they shared on such retreats. By trusting one another with their laughter and grief, their successes and failures, their fears and deep desires, they experienced the Mystery of God at the heart of it all.

### *A changed heart and a changed world*

Implicit in all the motives for making a retreat explored thus far is the desire for change. People make retreats to be changed by them, to come back home somehow different from when they left for retreat. They are seeking in one form or another a changed heart. This desire might be expressed as a longing for deeper peace, interior freedom, a more trusting relationship with God, healing of childhood wounds or a desire to experience God's unconditional love and acceptance where they feel most broken. Others will speak of a desire for a greater sense of connection to their own souls or for more depth and authenticity in their prayer life. Still others may speak of wanting to increase their mindfulness of God's presence in the midst of their daily routine. All of these desires involve a conversion of the heart, a change in interior awareness, attitudes, values and affective experience.

The desire for change that draws people to retreats is not, however, limited to interior change. Many who decide to make a retreat come to discern where God is present in significant life decisions that they face concerning personal relationships, career and vocational decisions or a persistent call to respond to a particular social need or issue of justice. They want to discern what action in the world or what structural and institutional changes in society God may be asking them to address. They are drawn to retreat in order to discern how to change the world so that it may more adequately express their interior vision and values. Even those whose primary focus was a personal change of heart will wonder as the retreat ends how to embody that change in daily life.

In traditional retreats this desire for change was often concretized in a retreat 'resolution' which commonly involved a commitment to some specific change of behaviour. In new forms of retreat emphasis tends to be placed on ongoing discernment rather than commitment to a resolution that may prove unworkable in the actual circumstances of life. The elusive reasons of the heart need to be acknowledged at the end of the retreat just as they were at the beginning. The internal and external changes that a retreat requires may not be immediately evident. They will reveal themselves over time if one remains in touch with the interior process initiated on the retreat. The process of

fashioning new attitudes, images, habits of life or changes in relationship or social structures requires creativity, grace and patience. Finding a way to embody subtle changes of awareness and deep spiritual experiences requires sustained and careful discernment long after the retreat is over.

### **Conclusion**

In many ways the reasons why people choose new forms of retreats are the same reasons people have always chosen to make retreats. They are drawn or impelled by inner needs and desires of the heart that they only partly understand. They are driven by dissatisfaction with the less abundant life and the spiritual impoverishment of an ego-shaped world. They hunger for a direct experience of the Mystery of God within and beyond the religious language and forms that can so easily obscure that Mystery. They seek to find the presence of God in all things, at the heights and depths and plateaux of human experience. They seek a changed world that can express the changed heart they have experienced on retreat. Those who seek new forms of retreat to meet these desires do so because these retreats function as tougher and more supple wineskins to contain the new wine that the Spirit is pouring out at this moment of history.

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### NOTES

1 The quotation from Pascal is cited and translated by John S. Dunne in *The music of time* (Notre Dame IN and London: Notre Dame Press, 1996), p 23. The original saying appears in the edition by Jacques Chevalier in Pascal, *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1954), p 1221.

2 Aldous Huxley, *The devils of Loudon* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p 71.

3 This quotation of Jung may be found in Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham, *The spirituality of imperfection* (New York: Bantam Books, 1992), p 23.