

I am here, now

Philip D. Roderick

Where do we start?

AS A FOETUS IN THE WOMB and as a newly born baby I am designed to begin where I am. I am raw consciousness, certainly not self-consciousness yet, simply responding. At this point in human formation the wider realities of a larger system of meaning – of my identity, of my beliefs and values and even of my capabilities – are not part of my world. Where I am – within or without my mother's body – determines everything. This 'where' is precisely where we are invited to begin on retreat. But, as you may notice, as soon as the word 'where' is mentioned, our minds skip ahead, rushing to entertain pictures of streets or trees, houses or landscapes. We have to remind ourselves to go back a few steps. Back into our first environment, the body.

My body is real

I am still amazed and appalled when I go to conferences and retreats, committees and working groups, to experience with what scant regard the body is held in Christian circles. As perhaps the incarnational faith par excellence, we are massively dysfunctional in our treatment of our own most personal environment. It is no wonder that those outside the Church take us and our spiritual journey with a pinch of salt.

The mood today is holistic. In so many ways this returns us to our Jewish roots, but although in Christian circles we pay lip-service to those full-blooded roots and shoots, those of us who plan and design meetings and conferences remain all too often trapped in a radically disembodied mindset. From this ghastly and continuing situation we can, of course, be liberated. Some retreat organizers and conductors realize their prophetic mandate to resource the whole person, body, mind and spirit, in the context of the whole place in which the participants are set for a day or two. Generally speaking, however, there is much work to be done in honouring the eminently local, the inescapably corporal.

Home sweet home

The environment – me and my locale – is fundamental. If we start where we are, our first environment is the body and our second

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environment is our home. Few of us, however, consider that our home could become a retreat. We get used to our homes much as we get used to our clothes. After a while our home becomes warm and well used, practical and comfortable but not evidently mystical – not necessarily a place of deep learning. Each of us knows that our home is not perfect, but then neither is our body and nor is the world, but it is where we are and all that we have got, at least for the moment. But have we realized all that we have got? Can my home also yield mystery, revelation, everyday inspiration?

We have become accustomed to our home providing the context for eating and drinking, supporting and nurturing, activity and rest. How can we access the extra, yet fundamental dimension that our home can offer to us, and perhaps even to our visitors? The key question is simple and yet crucial: am I willing to make a mental shift, a paradigm shift as they say, to include, as an extra component in the perception and ordering of my home, a consecrated space? If I am able to make such a commitment, at least once a week if not every day, I shall find myself responding positively and unequivocally to the divine alluring. 'Be still and know that I am God.' 'Be still and know that I am.' 'Be still and know.' 'Be still.' 'Be.'

If we are fortunate, our house may include a garden and in honouring the biblical principle of consecration, the garden comes into its own. A garden is, by its very nature, a metaphor, a symbol, a microcosm not only of Gethsemane but also of Eden, not only containing the body of death in the wintertime of faith, but also the greening of the risen place in the Easter moment. In Britain we are truly blessed. Even the smallest home often has a garden or backyard. For those living in flats or apartments, some plants inside and a window box outside can suggest at least a garden of the heart. This is the crux of it – a retreat's true home is in the heart.

My home is my hermitage

For those who live alone, solitude may be involuntary, but it is a small leap of the imagination for each of us to conceive of oneself, at least for some particular hours of the day or night, as something of a hermit. A hermit is different from a recluse. Whereas a recluse is someone who has cut him- or herself away from other people, not wishing to engage in human society any more, a hermit, strictly speaking, is someone who is journeying into God and who has discerned (and others have confirmed this) that God is calling him or her to live alone, at least for a while, so that he or she can better pray,

love and serve. Those who have a faith journey and who happen to live solo through no particular choice of their own may be said to be provisional or mini-hermits. The challenge is the same for all of us: how to consecrate life and living space to be, for as much of the day as possible, truly a temple of the Holy Spirit.

For those who are married and/or have children living at home with them, the picture is very different in terms of creative tension, but similar in the task of consecration. Having lived for a year in a Russian Orthodox monastery in 1973 and having discovered my 'hermit heart', and yet now being happily married with two teenage children, I know at first hand the syncopation of agony and ecstasy, of the overstretchedness and yet the deliciousness and reward of a full house and noisy hearth. Yet here too lies the call for balance, for rhythm, for a counterpoint between privacy and belonging, stillness and bustle, withdrawal and return. Parents, couples, friends sharing a house, a monastic community – all are invited to make time and create space for the hermit as well as the hero, the contemplative as well as the activist. Easily said, but how done?

Local is beautiful

Many Christians, perhaps the majority, have not yet incorporated times of retreat into their lives and lifestyles. Making such an admission highlights clearly the fact of our falling far short of the clear modelling of Jesus and his first and closest disciples. The gospel writers, albeit in verses and half-verses tucked away in between stories of major teaching or healing events, clearly evidence Jesus prioritizing times for personal prayer, solitude and communion. What is equally significant is the fact that Jesus seemed always to choose places of beauty, most often close at hand, in which to draw breath and spiritually connect with his source, his 'abba'. Natural surroundings consistently are identified in the Scriptures as contexts for spiritual nurturance and engagement.

Time after time we are shown Jesus taking himself, with or without his closest friends, to a place apart for rest and reflection. Surely we can deduce, therefore, that this is a discipleship imperative, not an inconsequential option just for those who 'have the time'. We are being called to make the time and to discover ways of doing the same for our spiritual colleagues, church congregations and those who are 'bumping into God at the edges' whilst seeking meaning, truth and serenity.

Let us move now from the consideration of our own immediate and private space, both within the body and the home, to the provision of

local, low-cost and highly accessible space for others. The early Church demonstrated that the warmth of the home could be stewarded for the well-being of the people of God. And so the home and the garden, no less than the wilderness and the lake, can be put to the service of the kingdom.

The Quiet Garden ministry

It was the combination of these insights that occasioned the formation in 1992 of The Quiet Garden movement. This is a simple, but eminently replicable ministry of hospitality and prayer, based primarily in people's houses and gardens but recently beginning to include church premises, schools, prisons and business settings. With few of us having the equivalent of the Sea of Galilee or the Mount of Olives close at hand, as did Jesus and his disciples in the pause points between their various perambulations, it seemed vital to me as a Christian educator to discover a parallel resource. Having returned from study leave focused in contemplative settings in India and North America, and sitting in my own back garden in High Wycombe one summer's day, a penny dropped.

There clarified the need for someone to 'lend' us their home and garden as a mini-retreat centre for a day a week, fortnight or month. This then, through advertising in neighbouring churches and educational organizations, could be offered as a place of encounter with God and with others travelling on a similar faith journey. This very simple and pragmatic seed-thought miraculously became a reality only a matter of weeks later with the offer of use of a wing of a house just a stone's throw from St Giles' Church, Stoke Poges, where Thomas Gray had written his *Elegy written in a country churchyard*. It soon became clear to me that such provision of opportunity for periodic and regular retreat at the local level was not icing on the cake, but integral to an effective programme of Christian formation.

With over one hundred and fifty Quiet Gardens on six continents now open regularly and with three hundred enquiries in the pipeline, it is evident that this small-scale complement to the sterling work of the major retreat house is meeting a substantive need. The Quiet Garden warmth and welcome, the usual inclusion of teaching about some aspect of prayer and spirituality from the Judaeo-Christian tradition, and the invitation to be part of an informal, extended community of 'contemplative companions' in the neighbourhood and across the world, has proved to be singularly attractive and replenishing for people of all backgrounds. Houses, gardens and institutional spaces,

large and small, in rural areas, town suburbs and inner cities are being offered for provisional use for a few precious hours a month as wellspring, oasis and sanctuary.

Home-grown retreats

As I and the other Quiet Garden staff and regional co-ordinators visit or keep in touch with different Quiet Gardens it is delightful constantly to be presented with the truth that there is no such thing as 'a very ordinary' place. Homes generally are loved places and it is proving to be a humbling and rewarding experience for many hosts and hostess to open up their loved space for the refuelling, support and equipping of others and to realize how much this offering means to their visitors. When we go to someone else's home we need no longer be chore-conscious. We can allow ourselves to rest and receive from God and from the other. We can breathe a sigh of relief for the time and space in which to draw apart locally, set aside from our own concerns and configurations.

This can also be true for the Quiet Garden host. One home-owner in Canada had worked hard on his garden for ten years. He and his wife opened up their home on a monthly basis as a Quiet Garden. On the first day of their programme he found himself with tears in his eyes, sitting on one of the benches he had fashioned and placed in different niches in the garden, looking at one of the trees he had planted ten years before. He realized suddenly that this was the first time that he had stopped working *on* his garden and given himself permission simply to contemplate and delight *in* it.

The ordinary becomes extraordinary as we learn to enter a sabbath rest. It is a learning, and often a gradual learning. But it is a deep learning. Then we work with the dawning realization that such a 'sabbath rest' is meant to come around regularly, not occasionally. Whether we plan them for a matter of minutes each day or in a chunk each week or each month, home-grown retreats are a way of honouring in our lifestyle the need we all have for periodic withdrawal and reflection. Then we can taste the fruit: the body, our own hearth, and someone else's welcome can be wonderful contexts for change and development, inner journey and outer sharing.

What constitutes a Quiet Garden?

Let us look briefly at seven examples of home-based Quiet Gardens in different parts of the world, just to highlight the range. It is important to stress that nowhere is too small, too unkempt or too ordinary. We are

not promoting garden manicure, we are inviting people into a hands-on stewardship of beloved space. A terraced or semi-detached house can be as effective a Quiet Garden as a manor, a tiny kitchen garden as enriching as rolling acres. The crucial ingredient is intentionality: the offering of the moment in context to the living God. In Christ, all are equal and all as potentially fruit-bearing.

Lily Farm Quiet Garden in Buckinghamshire is set in two acres of garden and orchard. In the sitting room there is seating for fifteen to twenty people. The garden boundary leads to woodlands for walking. The Quel Bec Quiet Garden in Cothelstone, Somerset, has beautiful open countryside adjacent to an area of outstanding natural beauty at the foot of the Quantock Hills. There is meeting space for twelve people. A Quiet Garden in Suffolk has a garden which runs down on to the marshes within the ancient coastal village of Dunwich.

To paint something of a different picture, in India, in Maharashtra State, one of the four Quiet Gardens is in the red light district of a sprawling city. Prostitutes and their children are welcomed and supported. In Uganda there is a Quiet Garden on the edge of the Nsambya Hospital in Kampala, surrounded by a bamboo fence. This is used specifically by the doctors and nurses caring for HIV/AIDS patients. In Kenya, a wonderful priest in one of Nairobi's city slums hosts a Quiet Garden in a newly constructed mud building which doubles as a schoolroom and clinic. The 'Quiet Garden' time, with the community sewage running openly just outside the door, is healing and hugely appreciated.

The Cadboro Bay Quiet Garden, British Columbia, Canada, has the use of the house and half-acre garden with wooded paths to the beach. The Chatsworth Quiet Garden is in a central Toronto home with a small garden adjacent to a ravine. The ravine is wild in one direction but with a rose garden within a five-minute walk. In New Zealand, in North Otago in the South Island there is a seven-acre farmlet with a sheep stud and three-quarter-acre garden close to the historic town of Oamaru. Suffice it to say that the permutations of the Quiet Garden or Quiet Space in the City models are endless. The vision is adapted and applied to the need each time, and extraordinary initiatives emerge and evolve.

Context needs communicators

What enables your local environment to be transformed from family home to mini-retreat house? The answer is twofold: call and co-operation. The householder must first have a sense of invitation or call from God, and the backing of any other family members that there

might be. This then gives rise to a clear motivation and intention to consecrate the space for a regular slot of time during the year, whatever is the appropriate time-frame to house the Quiet Garden programme.

Second, it is crucial to the success of any Quiet Garden that there is a small group of prayerful and loving people, known by the host or hostess, who can co-operate to make the whole thing happen. This core or co-ordinating group offers practical help both in planning and publicizing the programme of teaching or input and in making people feel at home as they arrive and journey through the day. The core group members offer spiritual help both by regularly immersing the whole project in prayer and by being spiritually alert to the needs of participants as they move from input to solitude to sharing. The people need the place and the place needs the people to embody and to communicate the key trinitarian values of creativity, compassion and celebration, of wonder, wisdom and worship.

Communicators need content

What became evident at the very outset of the Quiet Garden ministry seven years ago was that many people need, for an effective retreat, more than context and communicators, more than place and people: they need educational content. Sometimes, as in many churches or places of natural beauty, there is only the context. That is fine for those who can deal creatively with silence and solitude, but there are many, inside and outside the churches, who require some teaching, some resources and support to be able to make the most of a time of quietness, of prayer, of deep communion. Context, communicator and content seem to be the three things necessary for a truly effective use of the environment of retreat.

The Way at work

As a natural process, the principle of replication, of organic growth, is a wonderful one. No sooner had we begun seeding the stewardship of homes for other Quiet Gardens than it became apparent that this model of do-it-yourself retreat environment had application also to the world of work, in fact, to the world of everything! Schools, colleges, hospitals, prisons and businesses all suggested themselves as contexts for transformation through placing mini-retreats on the agenda.

To identify and then protect a small area within a complex for the sole or occasional use by those wishing to be still or to relax was perhaps not an impossible task, especially if the headteacher, principal, governor or managing director was behind the project. So, Quiet Spaces

in Schools and Quiet Spaces in the City were born two or three years ago as attendant projects of the Quiet Garden Trust. We now are seeking teachers and business people, prison and hospital staff who resonate with the vision of the Way at work to help champion these contemplative ventures into the world of organizations.

Reclaim your environment

The leavening and enriching power of such retreat settings in contexts of care, education and industry is colossal. As more Christians become aware of the extraordinary simplicity of building the environment of retreat in a provisional or a permanent way in the workplace or the home, I believe that we are poised to witness the first-fruits of a movement of the Spirit to re-imagine and reclaim for the journey into wholeness, the journey into God, the place and the space of our living and breathing – the environment of the body, the home and the workplace. I am here, now. My retreat can be too.

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