

PERSONAL RETREAT

A personal retreat can be the most powerful way to find rest and renewal.

It allows us to take a step back from our lives and gain clarity. We can grieve our losses and consolidate our gains. We can see more clearly where we have been and where we are in this moment, and we can catch a vision for what lies ahead.

By connecting with God and ourselves we have more to give others upon our return. On retreat, we can get our bearings and become more centered and focused. As we learn to relate to ourselves with acceptance and self-compassion, we are free to change.

Finding our peace empowers us to live authentically and joyfully. By clearing out space in our hearts and quieting the competing voices within, we hear the still, small voice of God.

*My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag.
Look! There he stands behind our wall,
gazing through the windows,
peering through the lattice.
My beloved spoke
and said to me,
“Arise, my darling,
my beautiful one,
come with me.
See! The winter is past;
the rains are over and gone.
Flowers appear on the earth;
the season of singing has come,
the cooing of doves is heard in our land.
The fig tree forms its early fruit;
the blossoming vines spread their fragrance.
Arise, come, my darling;
my beautiful one,
come with me.”*

Song of Songs 2:9-13

The urgent call of Jesus is sometimes for us to engage life and relationships in a way that makes a difference for others. However, we must consider the possibility that His heart's desire is most reflected in the call of the lover to the beloved to come away for a time of communion and intimacy.

Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.

- Luke 5:16

Jesus knew that His love for others would move Him to engage with them in ways that would deplete Him. He was aware of His desperate need and desire to stay connected to His own soul and the lifeline of His relationship with His Father.

Many of us feel our feelings best in solitude and can best be still in settings where we have no obligations or expectations calling us. A lonely place is a place where we have no one who has any claim to our time or attention. It is a place that allows us to connect with nature. The best setting is the one that resonates most with our soul – mountain, beach, desert, forest or plains.

You will need at least 48 hours at your destination. Don't cut this short. Longer is better.

Take comfortable clothing and simple food, unless you are going to fast. (You will still probably need clothing. ☺) I take water, cereal and milk, fruit and yogurt, coffee, tea, half and half, honey, peanut butter, bread, eggs and cheese. I also take canned soups, and other easily prepared foods. Chips and salsa make a good snack, and microwave popcorn. I also take nuts and protein bars. Sometimes I take sandwich fixings or salad ingredients, but keep your menu simple and healthy.

Take a journal – preferably one that looks nice and that inspires you to write in it. You may wish to take an inspirational book, devotional or book of poetry. You may also take some stationery in case you decide to write a note of gratitude or apology to someone. I always take a Bible along with a concordance to help me find passages that come to mind.

Turn off your cell phone. If necessary, check in with those at home once a day for a brief chat. Complete solitude is optimal. Don't be checking email or Facebook. Be sure to set your voicemail and email before you leave to indicate that you are unavailable. If you are staying at a retreat center, give your family that number in case they absolutely must get in touch with you.

Communion occurs when we share a physical experience in the context of a loving relationship. Thus, in our day-to-day lives, mealtimes are good opportunities for communion. On a retreat, we have a chance to be with Jesus in a setting where we can commune with Him and with nature.

Make it a point to notice the breeze, the warmth of the sun on our skin, the crunch of snow underfoot, the cool of the surf, the texture of a blanket, the shapes of the clouds, the sound of a bird or the scent of a flower. The lover's invitation in the passage above is to see, feel, taste, hear and smell. He invites His love to arise. He wishes her to activate the part of her that desires intimacy more than productivity or comfort and the status quo.

On retreat, I suggest there be no agenda. The first twelve to twenty-four hours are just for decompressing. For some, this will be an anxious time. Resist the urge to check in with

others. Do not invite anyone to join you! Resist the urge to go back home! You may feel extreme restlessness or loneliness. Don't let it move you to connect with others.

Journal, rest, eat, nap, walk, read, or sit in stillness. Take a bath or shower and fully enjoy the sensations on your body. Minister to your body as though you were taking care of Jesus himself. Enjoy the texture and taste of the food. Be mindful of each bite.

Practice being aware of your breath. Count your breaths up to ten and then start again. Try to focus only on your bodily sensations. If a thought distracts you, notice it and return to your breath.

When thoughts or feelings emerge, welcome them. Resist the urge to judge things as good or bad. Be curious, open, accepting and loving toward yourself. Sometimes, oddball thoughts and images are the things that God will use to reveal the very things you will gain most from inspecting. Don't try to figure everything out. Just remain open to your experience.

Don't be surprised when your thoughts are extreme. Sometimes, the enemy is tempting you to fear or judgment. Sometimes your unspoken fears or desires are being activated by the stillness. Don't be afraid. Just sit in the feelings as they arise. God will be with you in the process.

Write down the anxious thoughts you have, as well as the moments of insight or clarity. Write a letter to God, pouring out all your negative feelings regarding your life, your circumstance, yourself, your past. Don't be afraid to tell Him everything. After you have written it, set it aside. Later in your retreat, you can come back to it and read it aloud to God.

When you have read your letter to God, it can be very useful to take a fresh sheet of paper or your journal and write a letter from God to you. What do you imagine He would say to you at this point in time? You may be surprised at what comes out. It may reveal something about how you see God or something about how He views you.

As you leave your retreat setting and travel home, reflect on your time. How did you grow? What changed? What became clearer? What tokens do you want to take with you back into daily life?

Personal retreat can be one of the greatest gifts you can give yourself and God. Intimacy requires time and a safe environment. Make it a habit to go away with God.