

Camp Without Counselors

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It should be familiar to me by now – that reluctance, the butterflies (or more ominous insects) in my tummy, that disconcerting sense that Something Is Up punctuated by vague waves of anticipation and anxiety. I should know it's just the pre-retreat process working through my being, readying me to go off and immerse myself in – what? Perhaps bears feel like this as they get ready to den up for the winter. It reminds me of PMS – a collection of feelings and reactions that make no sense until you identify them for what they are. Do geese feel like this before they fly South?

I should recognize these symptoms when they start, should just say, "This, too, will pass." Because it always does pass. Always the symptoms pass and transmute into an utterly absorbing way of being for a time, a way of being which releases me to greater freedom, more life, which restores my soul. I should recognize in these symptoms the Holy Spirit urging me toward healing.

For the past four years I have been attending meditation retreats, one week each February and July, one weekend each October and April. I abandon husband and dogs, tell my friends, "I'll get back to you," and put my job on hold. Then I move in with a bunch of people – some of them complete strangers – in some isolated, rather Spartan place and wait for God to take over. By now the pattern of preparation, participation, reentry and consolidation should be fixed in my mind.

"You don't have to go, you know," says my husband when I ask him to reassure me because I'm afraid to strike out for a CSD retreat. But of course I have to go. I want to go. This fear is just part of the process. Who will be there? What if they don't like me? What if they feed me tofu? What if I don't like *them*? These recurring worries are my familiars. They distract me. They keep me from looking straight into the eyes of the tiger. The tiger offers me a ride on its sleek and striped back – but what if, as I step gracefully off its back, it wheels around and eats me up? What if I come back home inside the tiger's stomach – or am left behind in the form of Tiger Doo, casually deposited in a field to fertilize the earth. Well? Isn't that really why I go on retreats? To be changed in my very substance, transmogrified into tiger dung. What if I come back as bread and wine?

"Going on retreat is like going to camp without any counselors," I tell my husband. He doesn't seem reassured by that analogy. Well, I guess Jerry acts sort of like a counselor – at least he always admonishes the group to sober living – quiet after 9:00 p.m. – early to bed – no orgies of conversation and self-revelation stretching into the wee hours. Bit of a wet blanket, actually. Still, living with others on retreat calls for responsible self care so that each of us can be present to the whole community for the meditation and healing work we do together. I am deeply grateful to the others who have left their families, friends and jobs behind to share the work of the retreat with me. Their commitment calls me to be accountable for my actions. Together we form a foundation which supports our individual healing and the growth of the community.

Looking back over the past years of retreats, I can make out a pattern in my individual healing work. My retreat experience has evolved from fireworks to fireflies. The first two CSD retreats I attended were dynamite, knock my socks off, get my attention, ecstatic *son et lumiere* tableaux. They were like the youth group retreats I remember from adolescence

which were full of highly amplified music and testosterone. Only this time the passion was pretty clearly spiritual. I was filled by the Holy Spirit, passionately in love with God, finding Him in every living, breathing stone, leaf and dewdrop – every face, gesture and word of my companions. Returning from those retreats, I felt like my face was shining. I was highly energized with a lot of rogue elephant energy.

Then came one retreat where I curled into a ball in the corner of a couch and slept for much of the week. So much care and security surrounded me. I was cradled in the life of that retreat. It was a time of wombing. I recall James Herriot's story about a dying sheep whose owner refused to put it out of its misery. Herriott surreptitiously injected enough tranquilizers into the animal to euthanize it and went on his way. When next he met the owner, he was astounded to learn that the sheep had slept profoundly for three or four days and then had gradually awakened and staggered into the pasture to graze. Herriott attributed the sheep's healing to the power of deep rest. Such healing rest in a safe place was offered to me on that retreat.

Of course there was the Retreat from Hell. All my demons – loneliness, isolation, jealousy, blind bull-headedness – all the monsters out of their cages. I expected to retreat from all that stuff, but it followed me and demanded my attention. In the aftermath clarity came from objective observation and a continuing presence of love. So much for the illusion that retreats are escapes.

Recently the retreats have seemed more stable and more solitary for me. Not so much laughter and silliness. Not so much easy chatting. Not much drama in the past couple of retreats. Something is shifting in my belly. Something is burrowing into the interstices between my cells. Feelings come and go more gently. Is this progress? Is this surrender? Let it be so.

Talking about Post Retreat Reentry, the husband of a companion said, "I never know who will be coming in the door when she comes home from a retreat – something with horns or an angelic being radiating light." It's for sure, returning home from retreat has its challenges. First of all, it is hard to merge into the flow of traffic, both literally and figuratively. All sort of stimuli bombard rather tender sensibilities. Calluses have to build up again on all the surfaces. Don't tell me what's happening on the world scene. Give me a little time in the slow lane.

After some retreats I have slept for several days – healing sleep – waking from naps to meditate, read, meditate again. I try not to schedule anything very demanding in the week after a retreat. Checking in with fellow retreatants helps me keep by balance. I regard this post retreat time as if it were a recovery period after surgery. I surround myself with comforts and quiet. Give it time. In the first couple of weeks after returning I schedule an appointment for spiritual direction. That helps me clarify my impressions and examine insights. Gradually, the benefits of the healing work on the retreat emerge in my relationships with myself and others. My heart feels generous, full of compassion. I want to cooperate with and surrender to those feelings. And after a couple of months, I start checking my calendar for the dates of the next retreat.