

Find a Retreat to Suit You

Trusting your own inner voice of calm

by Dennison Berwick

There are as many good reasons to go on a retreat as there are places in Canada offering specific programs or just quiet accommodation where your desire for solitude and calm will be respected. Common to all - and perhaps what separates the experience of a retreat from tourism or staying at a resort hotel - is the desire for peace of mind, deep relaxation and re-connection with our inner being.

Of course, staying home alone, turning off the telephone and the television, and not answering the door, can create conditions for an excellent retreat, but most people find getting away from accustomed surroundings and breaking their daily routine helps them to slow down, relax and so become more awake, alert and open to the wonder of their life and all life. Different spiritual traditions describe this mystical experience variously as God, the transcendent, the Great Spirit, Buddha-mind. It is impossible to translate into words, but what is common to all spiritual practice and deeper personal reflection, is the need for a lack of distractions in order to develop concentration, reflection and profound insight through meditation, prayer and attention to ritual. (Our daily rituals can include brushing our teeth and watching the sun rise, as well as hymn-singing or chanting.)

Surroundings can greatly influence us, and we are extremely fortunate to live amid the breathtaking natural beauty of the land we call Canada. As the financial administrator of the Catholic Episcopal Corporation of Whitehorse, Yukon, wrote to me in a recent letter: "Here in the quiet North, in the winter, with snow softly falling, daylight ended early, there are many who utilize the long quiet evenings to pray and reflect on the word of God. There are also many who don't but the country and the lifestyle is very conducive to prayer and meditation."

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Going on a retreat - whether to a monastery, purpose-built centre or bed and breakfast - is one way to surround ourselves with the lack of distractions and support we need to reconnect with our true selves. Finding the retreat that's right for you at this moment in your life does take a small amount of investigation of what's available (hopefully made simpler by the publication of this book) and a sincere heart to trust yourself to commit to whatever retreat practice really attracts you! Everyone waivers in their practice from time to time but commitment to a particular practice, whether for a few days or much longer, helps us to keep going despite doubts and discomforts. It is not uncommon to be frightened by the experience of truly meeting yourself without the familiar distractions of family, television or alcohol.

The first step to finding a suitable retreat is to look through this "Directory of Retreats in Canada" to see what attracts you: perhaps staying for a weekend at a bed and breakfast in the country, or maybe living in silence for a week at a monastery among nuns or monks celebrating the Divine Office. Trusting our intuition and acting on it can mark the beginning of spiritual practice.

Retreats are not resorts, so accommodation and facilities will be adequate but basic. You will have to decide what standard is acceptable and what facilities are important to you. Many places offer guests the use of the chapel, library etc. and a few places have a hot tub, swimming pool or other recreational amenities. Obviously, jumping into a swimming pool between periods of prayer or meditation can be either relaxing or distracting, depending on your practice, experience and point of view.

Many places offer guided retreats, special programs or some form of "theme" activities such as yoga or painting. Only brief mention of what's available could be included in this book, so it's always best to write asking for a brochure and more information about what interests you. As a courtesy and to help keep down costs, please send a stamped self-addressed envelope. Many retreats are not organized to answer requests by telephone.

The next step after you've had your questions answered satisfactorily (no matter how outlandish or "stupid" they may seem) and booked to stay, is to prepare physically, mentally and spiritually. The retreat centre itself may send out a guideline on clothing and what else to bring, arrival time, and give a brief description of what to expect on the first day. But there are other preparations which you can make to give yourself the best possible retreat experience.

One simple preparation, but important if you will be practising meditation, is to consider cutting out drinking caffeine in coffee and tea five days to a week before going on the retreat. You will be doing yourself no favour at all if you drink a last cup of Mocha Java just before arriving! Whatever sense of restlessness you may experience when sitting in meditation will be made much more uncomfortable when combined with the agitation of caffeine withdrawal. Severe addicts may experience headaches. These pass after a day or so, but so does a weekend retreat! Obviously, many retreats do not ban coffee or tea, but it's best to check in advance, especially if having a hot cup of coffee in the morning is important to you.

Ensuring that business at home will be taken care of while you'll be away is another important preparation. Help yourself to avoid distractions by planning for the welfare of plants or pets at home before you leave. The same is true of any urgent family or work-related matters. Deal with them, if you can, and then let them go. Your retreat is for you; taking along the cellular phone to keep in touch defeats the purpose of investing your energy, time and money.

Reading appropriate material before going for a retreat may be useful because it can help clarify priorities and re-open your inner eye to landmarks of the spiritual landscape. This can be equally useful and important after finishing a retreat; but on some guided retreats reading during the retreat may be discouraged or forbidden because it can quickly become another convenient distraction keeping us away from ourselves.

Joy is probably the abiding quality of a personal retreat, whether a weekend of walking in the countryside, or more intensive spiritual training. Spending time with ourselves can be hard work sometimes but, even then, there is often a sense of fulfillment and deep joy. Finding the retreat to suit you involves patience and honesty with yourself and others and, perhaps above all, courage to trust your own inner voice of calm.

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