

## **The Four Needs for Daily Sanctuary Need #3: Solitude and Self-renewal** by C. Forrest McDowell, PhD

Perhaps the most historically documented use of sanctuary has been our human need for solitude, spiritual renewal, or inspiration. The natural ebb and flow of life towards and away from others seems to naturally dictate this need. As stated earlier, we often find ourselves teetering in response to the demands of everyday life and seeking contact and comfort in warm, caring relationships. But in solitude we look for something else perhaps lacking in the above — a depth of soulful reflection and solace, sincere spiritual communion, even creative inspiration. Solitude, however, cannot be entirely defined by the desire for isolation or individual aloneness, nor by the activity it takes. Lovers, families, friends, even a person walking their dog, often use alone time to bond in some way. Nevertheless, ultimately it is the use of solitude for self-improvement that finds its best expression as sacred sanctuary time and space to oneself.

Little islands of repose during a busy day, a busy week or during the year are restful, replenishing and vitalizing. They give us private moments of incredible grace from the world, even as we are often amidst it. Japan, for example, is the most overpopulated country in the world, with the most people per square mile. Individuals have very little privacy. But it is exactly here in Japan that the tradition of small, quiet gardens set aside for solitary moments and meditation is still strong and important today.

### **Quest for Solitude**

When we think of sanctuary as an opportunity for retreat we are calling up the long forgotten monk or who dwells deep inside our soul. This part of our personality is centuries old, naturally seeking solitude for both religious and profane reasons. Let me trace just a little bit of history to underscore the need for solitude. We know that the Middle Ages, for example, focused exclusively on the religious sphere. Here, religious people withdrew in confinement to seek communion with God in order to attain to a transcendent sphere of existence. Notice I said religious people. The general public was often necessarily absorbed in day-to-day survival issues and solitary exclusion from worldly duties was next to impossible.

Not until the Renaissance period did laypeople first begin to express an interest in solitary retreat. However, unlike the Middle Ages, the goal was less *away* from others but rather *toward* oneself. The solitude of sanctuary was the goal of a humanistic search not necessarily focused on God communion. While it does not despise culture, the cultural attachment is minimized by absorption with nature. We have already seen how the poet Petrarca sought sanctuary from the masses to develop his individuality (despite his jilted love-wrought heart). His retreat was typical in that solitary pleasure was equated with sojourns into isolated countrysides. Retreat into nature obviously pre-dates Christianity, as seen in examples of Moses, Buddha, and other Eastern mystics. However, towards the end of the 16th Century, the spiritual side of solitude reared its head again, now as a proclamation for the masses. Garcia de Cisneros, a Benedictine Abbot of Montserrat, described this necessary experience as *exercitia spiritualia*, a way of renewing one's spiritual life. This change of view toward solitary retreat was ushered in by the Baroque period where people sought to flee the decadence of worldliness. In solitude they punished themselves for the transgression of worldliness.

The sensual era of history known as the Rococo period found cherishment of solitude in quite different ways. Here people retired — not alone — but with a small, select group of friends and acquaintances to

revel in the seclusion of nature. Or perhaps a couple in love retreated to a specific spot in nature. Gardens began to accommodate this desire, where a small private outdoor “room” was created with privacy hedges and other plantings. Clearly, nature plays an important role as the befitting background for people enjoying themselves not in relative isolation, but in social communion. Bucolic scenes in paintings, such as those of Antoine Watteau, do not depict the previous known reasons for solitary retreat with nature: as communion with greater spheres of meaning or God. Rather, the scenes are joyful, sunny, inviting — nature has become the goal of an excursion into another enjoyable realm, in much the same way we might use vacations today or a simple walk in a park or the country.

The Enlightenment approached solitude in both religious and profane ways. Secluded communities often attracted people (the brotherhood of Pietists come to mind) who sought a solitary life to cultivate a spiritual communion with God. But more common were the relatively solitary retreats in nature for brief periods of replenishment from the strains of life in society. In fact, the frequent desire for such oases of solitude melded with the architectural motivation of the time, and thus the construction of just the right type of dwelling in which to retreat. Tea pavilions, country homes for the nobility, hunting retreats and hermitages dotted the pastoral landscape. Duke Karl Eugen even named his retreat palace near Stuttgart “Solitude.”

However, by the end of the 18th Century, the early Romantics approached solitude with a more melancholy flavor. There rose an interest in what might be called “wounded retreats.” Abandoned lovers, for example, would retreat into their solitary suffering with almost an anticipatory mood. And couples would plan retreats for both affection and relationship healing in beautiful natural settings. The melancholy mood of the time had a curious preoccupation with the shadow side of the soul as it interfaced with society. The great philosopher Schopenhauer provided a philosophical canvas, and the affinity with newly constructed ruins and old graveyards offered a natural backdrop for the addiction to “Weltschmerz,” where the world is seen as all too prosaic, and so, elevated spirits must opt for solitude. Even Nietzsche felt himself a hermit by instinct and declared solitude his pure and beneficial home. These sentimental preoccupations gradually yielded in the 19th Century to more nihilistic tones, where the world of normal human intercourse was perceived as too banal and must be rejected in favor of a solitary retreat.

As evident in this little historical excursion, the quest for sanctuary as a means for solitude, solace, spiritual renewal, self-improvement, individuality, and even creative inspiration is present just beneath the surface of our life. It might even be suggested that there exists today a “culture of solitude,” or at least a profound acceptance of the need for occasional retreat. This is true in our own partnership. Because meditation and prayer is such an integral part of our life, we see our daily practice, both as individuals and a couple, as a type of sanctuary of solitude. Our children knew this to be the case since infancy and fully accepted our twice daily two-hour retreats. However, at times one or both of us need a more refined period of withdrawal, thereby choosing a week-long silent meditation retreat at a monastery, or powerful natural setting. Such times of solitude are incredibly regenerating for the body, mind, and spirit. They deepen our individual spiritual commitment, breathe new life into our relationship, and often unlock profound creative or intuitive insights into our work.

### **Being Drawn to Solitude**

People are naturally drawn to solitary experiences that deepen their understanding of life or perhaps knit their life back together. A friend of ours, Louis, has led annual vision quests for years into the high Oregon desert. He is always fully booked with both men and women. Another friend, William, chooses

his solitude in nature as a way of life, like John Muir, spending months each year hiking trails throughout the Pacific Northwest. His soft-spoken nature is balanced by his profound knowledge of the region and leads him to continue writing bestselling nature guides.

On a more personal level, Tricia occasionally evokes solitude in her own wooden and beautifully furnished studio. She is fortunate to have this safe haven in which to withdraw. Here she may sleep alone, meditate for long periods, and write late into the night. This sacred space was also a critical healing place at those times in the early years of our marriage when we were in great conflict. It gives me great comfort even today to peer out through the veil of woods that separates her space from the house and see the soft glow of candlelight, or to hear the inspiring arias of Hildegard de Bingen wafting through the night air. My personal need for solitude, if not chosen to bond with nature or to deepen my spiritual side through meditation or prayer, is most often connected to music. I too have been gifted with a removed solitary space in which, almost nightly by candlelight, I compose or play at my craft, the guitar. In such solitude my heart is totally enflamed for hours with passion, tenderness, playfulness — emotions I can only associate with some connection to God.

### **Psychological Need for Solitude**

One might ask, what then is the real value of solitude?

The psychoanalyst, Carl Jung, approaching it from a psychological point of view, might say *individuation* — to aid in the unfolding of the unique individual personality. In the process of our unfolding relationship to the world, sometimes we need time and space to ourselves to ponder our existence. In her marvelous poetic tribute to self-reflection, *The Invitation*, Oriah Mountain Dreamer ends with this poignant line: “*I want to know if you can be alone with yourself and if you truly like the company you keep in the empty moments.*”

This is great food for thought. How often do we permit ourselves to engage in a type of self-imposed “solitary confinement?” George Bernard Shaw expressed his hesitancy at such self-reflection because he thought that with the grace of the white angels who would accompany him, all the dark angels would rush in as well! Nevertheless, solace and solitude serve to cloak us within our own intimacy.

A musical friend of mine composed a haunting piece called *Soul-etude*. Musically, it calls up exactly the effect of solitude on the soul: as a brief yet necessarily reflective excursion into the song that is our life. I remember as an adolescent exploring this very interior realm, via such “soul-etudes,” within my bedroom. This place was my inviolable sacred space for reflecting on the conditions of my heart — its hurting and pain at the hands of an abusive father, its feelings of tenderness and love from my mother, its joy and laughter from my sisters, and its great healing expressed in my music, songs, and poetry.

Such solitude for reflection and healing serves more to free the soul than to imprison it. As an old Sherpa saying reminds: “Freedom is being equidistant from all the walls.” Reflect on your life for a moment. How do you integrate solitude into your lifestyle such that you may experience the freshness of a little more room from the walls of the world?

### **Spiritual Need for Solitude**

Another value of solitude speaks to our spiritual side. Jesus, for example, suggests that we must go into the wilderness of our soul to find our greater and higher connection beyond Creation. “Be still,” he says, “and know I am God.” Solitude allows us to surrender — our ego, will, desires, suffering. The saying, “Let go, let God,” has tremendous potency when we are alone in communion with the Creator. But solitude often gives us another insight: we should find the courage to let go lest we get dragged down.

There is another spiritual side to solitude. Solitude is a type of garden, very much like the Garden of Gethemene. Here Jesus spent his last few hours of freedom. The garden may be said to represent the substance of God, the secret place of our Being where we have a rendezvous with God. The symbolism of the Garden of Gethemene is powerful when we realize it means “oil press.” Metaphysically, the name represents the very process we come to within our consciousness when we recognize that we must “press out” all the vagaries of the world to come to the “pure oil” of Truth. Jesus had to come to terms with this himself in the garden, knowing his life would be over in a matter of hours.

So, solitude allows us to enter the Sanctuary of Truth, the inner garden of our soul. As Jesus reminds us, the gate to our inner sanctuary where God dwells is narrow. Such use of solitude is demanding, and few of us are willing to make the effort necessary to spend much time and space away from our worldly affairs.

### **Physical Need for Solitude**

There is yet a third value of solitude we may attune to: one in which it is chosen, not enforced, and which allows change and flexibility. This form of solitude is perhaps most appealing and accessible to people. The writer, Virginia Woolf would say all we need is “a room of one’s own” amidst our worldly duties. Such a room, we discover, is not a solitary retreat as in a cloister or a desert, but a *living space* in which a certain degree of privacy is granted. It is this type of space, and time to be in that space, that implies a sense of inviolability or privilege enabling us to get in touch with the world within, reflective of the world without.

Clearly, a kind of inner, psychic space is absolutely necessary, if not only for the peace of the soul, but for creative inspiration. The fact is places for solitude are as accessible as our desire to find or create them. I hope you understand this and don’t feel that you must manifest a whole lot of money to go away on retreat, or build a new addition. Once, for example, I rented an office in an old house downtown. Soon, however, I found myself distracted by other business tenants, making it difficult to focus on writing. One day I discovered an unused storage space beneath an insulated stairwell. You might find it amusing to know that this dark closet was where I began meditating!

Think about your need for space for alone time. Discuss this with your family or others. Begin to create that “room of one’s own” in which you can tuck yourself, if but for a few moments a day. This space can be momentary or permanent. Some of my fondest moments of solitude, for example, are merely sitting in my truck parked in a busy grocery parking lot listening to some inspiring music on the CD player! When you have identified such a space, use it, and use it well. Relax there, read, listen to music, simply watch the passing of the day or write your thoughts in a journal; meditate, pray, or count your blessings. This is solitary sanctuary you have earned by simply being human.

Excerpts from forthcoming book: **Islands of Grace: Creating Sanctuary in Daily Life**. By Dr.

Christopher Forrest McDowell and Tricia Clark-McDowell

Copyright © 2007 by Christopher Forrest McDowell, Ph.D.