

## A Hermitage Experience

**W**hen I considered a hermitage experience as a part of my twelve-month sabbatical, I had little understanding to draw upon. I made yearly directed retreats, and three months prior to entering a hermitage, a thirty-day retreat. But a hermitage experience seemed to be of a different ilk all together.

In 1985, when I participated in a Capuchin-Franciscan renewal program, I learned that St. Francis of Assisi spent about four months a year in hermitages and that he had about twenty such places where he would go for various periods of time. Our renewal group visited the first friary of the reform-minded Capuchins who made contemplation a linchpin of their reform. I decided to investigate the surrounding hillsides to find a cave that might have been a contemplative spot for one of the early Capuchins and to spend a day of fasting and praying there. After reading scripture, napping, being hungry and wandering around a bit, I arrived at a principle that helped me to understand the purpose of contemplation: Choosing to minimize distractions enables one to maximize attentiveness.

This awareness of the practices of St. Francis and the early Capuchin friars was affirmed in a letter that the Capuchin Minister General Paschal Rywalski wrote on Capuchin contemplation. He said that if a friar is attracted to contemplation “. . . then do not hesitate: devote a few months or a few years of your life to exclusive contemplative prayer, like our first friars and like St. Francis himself.”

My desire to spend a lot of time alone also motivated me towards a hermitage experience. I was disappointed with almost everything: the hierarchical church, the way I and others lived

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**Perry McDonald OFMCap** may be addressed at St. Patrick Parish; 1095 DeSoto Street; St. Paul, Minnesota 55101.

out priesthood, the local community experience of people never getting close, the way my province of friars actualized our mission statement and pastoral plan, and the way the fraternities prayed. I wanted to isolate myself from others except when I knew I could experience some intimacy and acceptance (with family, friends, counselor, spiritual director). When my sabbatical began I treasured the privacy, my own schedule, my own desires, and I found myself avoiding fraternity as much as possible. Since being alone had been good for me, it seemed like God was inviting me to deepen it by spending time as a hermit.

*St. Francis of Assisi wrote into his Rule for Hermitages:*

*When someone goes into a hermitage there should be two friars acting as "mothers" to take care of the hermit's needs and to see to it that he is undisturbed.*

As a place for my hermitage I chose a rustic, one-room cabin (40 feet by 16 feet) which the Capuchins owned, located a half mile into the woods on a rutted road and above a river in mid Wisconsin. Although I had been there in the late 1960s I had forgotten how rustic it was: no running water, no telephone, no electricity, no indoor plumbing,

and only minimally insulated. It was heated by a wood-burning stove, and cooking and refrigeration was done by means of propane gas. Water was hand-pumped and carried from the well and heated on the stove for washing purposes. A number of kerosene lamps were available as well as a battery-powered radio and an outdoor toilet. That the cottage was located sixteen miles from a Capuchin friary was a plus for me. I could go there to pick up my mail, to make telephone calls, to enjoy a hot shower, and to have some fraternity if I wanted it.

I initially planned to give sixty days to the hermitage experience; however, even during a twelve-month sabbatical, sixty days can still be hard to find. Two family celebrations took ten days out of the experience, and two other planned sabbatical events cramped the beginning and the end of the sixty days. However, left with forty-five days, I began my hermitage on 3 May and ended it on 28 June (1994).

I naturally fell into a schedule even though I adjusted it when I shopped for groceries or visited the nearby friary:

AM	PM
6:00 rising and breakfast	12:30 prepare and eat main meal
7:00 prayer and scripture reading	2:45 nap
8:30 spiritual reading	3:15 manual work
9:30 walk	5:00 prayer and scripture reading
11:00 manual work	5:45 spiritual reading
	7:00 prepare and eat light supper
	8:00 spiritual reading
	9:00 listen to classical music
	10:00 retire

## What I Learned

1. I quickly realized that I needed a larger support system than I had anticipated, appreciating the wisdom that St. Francis of Assisi wrote into his Rule for Hermitages: When someone goes into a hermitage there should be two friars acting as "mothers" to take care of the hermit's needs and to see to it that he is undisturbed.

Although I needed no one to guard the hermitage, I did need mothering friars. In the beginning, I went to the friary every other day for a shower since the cottage was too cool for a sponge bath; when I did so, I shared the noon meal with the friars. They provided me with instructions about how to use the primitive necessities of the hermitage. They also supplied me with a fax and a computer when I needed to communicate about a future ministry placement at the end of my sabbatical. Although sixteen miles away, the friars were my security.

2. While infused contemplation can never be gained by human effort, acquired contemplation can. By taking long, loving looks at reality, a contemplative spirit does develop because one has the leisure in which to do it. Leisure is essential to the hermitage and contemplative experience. Because I had no demands on me except those that were self-imposed, times for prayer and reflection naturally were extended in length as I entered more deeply into the experience of solitude.

Yet I still needed to discipline myself in order to encourage the contemplative spirit. I had to tell myself frequently to sit when I wanted to jump up impulsively and do something, to pause and look while on my walks, to slow down my eating habits, my driving speed, my task-completion compulsion while doing manual work, and even to take time to view the moon and stars at night

when I was tired. In a hermitage, one can become more aware of one's habitual way of acting and try to act differently.

I also learned:

- Living forty-five days without the use of an alarm clock, simply getting up at dawn and going to bed when it gets dark, puts one in sync with the natural rhythm of life.
- Even when attempting to pray one should stop to investigate the origin of a bird call. God is more praised by the wonderment and joy of eyes and ears alert to discovery than by the furrowed brow and grimaced face of one fighting distraction.
- Perhaps if we would recognize ourselves as the reflective consciousness of the universe we would spend less time working to improve it and more time praising it.
- Doing things slowly increases attentiveness.

3. Living in the heart of nature nurtures the contemplative spirit. The abundant growth of spring and early summer drew attention to the wild flowers, the animals, the sights and sounds of new life, swelling the heart in wonder, awe, and gratitude.

I also learned:

- Birds chirp loudly at dawn; frogs croak incessantly at night, and eagles fly so high that they disappear from sight.
- Snakes, raccoons, red foxes, deer, rabbits, squirrels, wild turkeys, hummingbirds, and otters exist quite well outside of zoos.
- Water from a well is naturally cool and has less sodium than diet soda.
- Those who travel back roads discard many aluminum cans. On three occasions I picked up over forty cans each time I walked two miles of roadway. (Imagine the total number of aluminum cans discarded on the back roads of America!)
- Living in close contact with nature means one is more interested in the weather report than in the progress Congress is making on national debt reduction. Being less protected makes one more weatherwise.
- Running fast for a short distance or flailing away at deer flies determined to rest in one's hair doesn't work. Wearing a combination of a hat with a piece of cloth extending from underneath a hat over one's neck protects a little (fashion in the woods is secondary!). However, the only real solution is to stay out of their territory.

- When a rain shower hinders working outside, one can draw profit from sensing how the rain freshens and cools the air.
- Leaves take delight in the wind because it gives them a chance to speak.
- Deer give a “harumph” noise when startled by humans, perhaps to give a warning sound to others nearby.
- Little creatures can do mighty things: Spiders produce thin silk wires to create intricate webs, and some worms can spin forty feet of silk to lower themselves to the ground from trees.
- Fish are elusive creatures, and their unexpected leaps out of the water with a returning splash always attract attention.
- In the thick woods, only the heartiest of small trees survive.
- When an animal’s hole in the ground is plugged up, it makes another.
- Out of what appears to be a dead stump of a felled tree, new life often springs forth. Life wants to live.
- The bark of a fir tree is multi-layered. Why it—or any other tree—sends out a branch in the places it does is worth puzzling about.
- Trees don’t seem to mind being encircled by ropes or clothes lines. Tight steel wires cut into a tree’s bark; but the tree simply surrounds the wire, incorporates it, and continues to grow.
- Rain bouncing on water sounds differently than when it lands on leaves, roof, table, or ground.
- Wild flowers can be picked and stored in indoor vases before a lawn mower destroys them, but that destroys them too.
- A butterfly determined to drown itself in the river even after being rescued twice should be undisturbed when it returns there a third time.
- Sharp, bright sunlight helps to see things in detail. In the woods, however, it creates dark shadows. The diffused light of early morning or of late evening or of a cloudy sky is the best for seeing in the woods.
- If one wants to live in the woods or travel on gravel roads one can’t expect to keep the car clean.
- When one is unfamiliar with the woods and fearful, the sound of an unseen squirrel leaping across the leaf-strewn ground makes one judge it to be large and dangerous. How often and easily are misjudgments made when one is in unfamiliar territory and fearful!

4. There are many values to living alone. Prior to this experience I lived alone only two months in my thirty-five years as a Capuchin. I enjoyed the personally determined schedule, the breaking of the institutional expectation of having an abundant supply of everything and of having most things taken care of by some one else. One can more completely give to others when one is ready to do so.

I also learned:

- Living in silence settles the soul.
- It is good to laugh out loud when one discovers one's foolishness, and it is easier to laugh at oneself when no one else is around. This might be the ultimate value of a hermitage experience.
- Yet, some companionship is needed to root one in the real world, less prolonged flights into idealism and unrelenting intuition (or whatever else is one's natural proclivity) take over.
- One needs to pray, read, and reflect to stay focused; yet one can do this without daily Eucharist and Liturgy of the Hours.
- Living alone increases awareness of loneliness, boredom, and fear. To be beneficial, these moments must be welcomed as friends and prayed over.

5. While a hermitage experience is aided by hiding from normal civilization, it is not good to be too far away. Supplies need to be purchased, telephone calls made, mail sent and received. I needed to go to a medical clinic to have a tick removed (since none of the homemade remedies worked) and to a drug store to purchase an antibiotic. I sat on my glasses, twisted them all out of shape, and popped out a lens. Luckily a friend was visiting and drove me to a mall where an optical store worker repaired my glasses at no cost.

Prior to this experience I was a news addict, needing the daily injection of news from national and local TV, the two daily newspapers, and weekly magazines. In the woods I learned that an hour's news from public radio is all I really need.

6. The rustic nature of a cottage positively added to my reflection. I learned how much water I used daily (which was quickly proven to me as I daily pumped five gallons from the well and hauled it to the cottage), how much it cost to eat each day, and how much garbage I produced. I greatly appreciated the heat of the sun as it warmed the minimally insulated cottage and added to the heat from the wood-burning stove.