

Chapter IV

The Project

The project for this paper involved securing around twenty people who would commit themselves to two retreats with the author as director. The retreats were scheduled so that the second one followed four months after the first.

The retreats were to be three days each. Following the India trip, this seemed quite short for a valid experience of silence. The author had interviewed persons who had spent months in silence. One minister he met had lived 11 years alone. A Hindu swami (Minister) had advised the author that any serious attempt to experience silence in India which were less than six months would be a waste of time and create even greater illusions! However, understanding the realities and practicalities of securing anyone for the experiment, the commitment was with the awareness that:

1. Participants would need to be reminded of the great limitation inherent on such a short time.
2. Any effort and experience of seeking God in a deeper way would not be wasted.
3. The participants might be motivated to seek further instruction and experience in the use and understanding of silence.

Brochures were prepared for distribution throughout the Presbytery Western New York. A special appeal was made to the Presbyterians, although others would be

accepted. Brochures were sent to each Presbyterian Church and asked to be included in Presbytery packets.

Twenty-nine people responded. Eighteen made a commitment to come for the two events. Thirteen were Presbyterian, two were United Church of Christ, two were Methodist, and one was Roman Catholic. The mix was appreciated especially having the Roman Catholic who recently become a member of the lay order of St. Francis. Two were Presbyterian pastors. Four of the eighteen were men. There were a school principal, a college teacher, several housewives and a dancer, with ages ranging from the 20s to the 70s. The mix and response was gratifying.

Many facilities were considered. There are many Roman Catholic retreat houses in the author's home area of Western New York. It was decided to use the Presbytery's camp facilities for several reasons. For one, it is quite simple and rustic, set in a rural, wooded, farm area, approximately thirty-five miles south of Buffalo. The camp had been almost exclusively used for summer camp activities and church retreats during the year. Never to the author's knowledge, had it been used for silent prayer retreats. Its simplicity also contrasted sharply with many retreat centers some of which were quite large and luxurious. The memory of India's humble ashrams signifying the attempt to detach from the ego's great hungers led to the choice of the Presbyterian facility. The author also felt that being Presbyterian, it would be less threatening to some colleagues than another, less familiar setting. The Presbyterian camp also had a large wooden lodge that included cooking and eating facilities. In addition, there were six heated cabins for those desiring more privacy.

The author felt preparation of meals was important in that simple vegetarian meals could be prepared and that members could volunteer time to help prepare them. The author's spouse directed the meal preparation.

The price also was attractive at the Presbyterian camp. Whereas most Catholic retreat houses charged around thirty dollars per day, the price was kept to forty-five dollars for the two weekends at the camp. In the author's mind, this was part of the desire to keep things as simple and as "poor" as possible.

A deliberate attempt was also made to use an "ashram" model in contrast to a more traditional retreat model. "Retreat," to many Protestants, is anything but silence as noted previously. They are often intense with highly structured educational and motivational goals. They also have been events in which emotions often become quite charged with eye, hear, smell, and touch sensations. This project was to be one of "stripping away," in trust people would feel gently nudged and led to the deeper self, or the Spirit of Christ within. It was thus an attempt to allow the power of silence to speak for itself with as few extra ornaments as possible.

The two weekends were also to be unlike many models the author was told about in India. Being unaccustomed to Roman Catholic retreats, he was surprised to hear a Roman Catholic priest in India, who directed Anjali Ashram in Mysore, emphasize that an ashram was not like a "Western retreat center." He saw Western retreats is highly structured in telling people exactly what to do; when to pray, what to read and write, what image to focus on. The India ashram is much less structured. They're also much less "community oriented" in that various "group building activities" are not planned or offered. Ashrams were "individualized" in that one is left quite alone to find his or her own path to experience the True self. There is little or no touching of one another in an

ashram. It is seen as a false way to experience true peace. The teacher or guru is there if one has questions or problems. He or she may invite one to ask questions or to feel free to ask for help, but the teacher will not use force. He remains in somewhat of an "on-call" basis.

When the author asked Fr. Amalorpavadass, the teacher/guru of Anjali Ashram in Mysore, if his was a "Christian Ashram," he was quickly told "No! This is not a Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, or Muslim Ashram; this is a 'Spirit Ashram.'" All that was asked of those who come is a serious desire and openness to the winds of the spirit. He did explain that participants would be expected to join in the early morning prayers, come to meals, and abide by the rules of silence. Meals were normally eaten in silence or listening to an appointed person read a lesson in spirituality.

Thus the ashram model was quite open with many hours left for reading, walking and doing whatever one wished to do. One was expected to conduct his/her own private prayers, to do his or her own laundry by hand, to keep his or her room, hut, or sleeping area clean and to help with the meals and general care of the ashram. Those who would not cooperate would be asked to leave. Participants therefore could not escape serious boredom if he or she was looking for a verbal or sensational high or cheap vacation. The purpose was to gently drive the inquirer inward to the Source, which in turn was seen as true community oneness.

Each morning, after an hour or two of group silence, watching light appear from darkness, participants would gather for worship. Songs, readings, and prayers would be offered. Christian ashrams would offer the Eucharist; the Hindu ritual included their own form of thanksgiving ritual. The Hindu Eucharist usually included rice and coconut

milk to be eaten in much the same manner as the Eucharist after being blessed in the name of a guru, a deceased holy person, or a form of Brahman.

The resident guru or teacher would initially ask for an interview with the new resident wanting to know what purpose he or she had in coming. The guru also would be available for further private interviews. If one did not request an interview for a few days, the guru or assistant would usually come by and gently ask if everything was okay and if a conference might be desired.

Following the evening meal, people would frequently be invited to a time of informal sharing for thirty minutes or so. It was called "Satsang." New people would be welcomed and further opportunity given for questions to be asked.

The ashram food was quite simple, consisting of rice and vegetables with fruit and tea. Participants usually sat on the floor (which took some getting used to), ate with their right hands off the tin plate or banana leaf (which took more practice). Sleep was on boards covered with thin mats. Westerners were usually given mosquito netting. Ashrams were not places with many physical comforts. One was being pushed in another direction. Bede Griffiths' ashram in South India was actually quite "prosperous" in contrast to some others the author visited. Over the past thirty years, Bede's ashram had gained considerable international recognition and many had left part of their "prosperity" as a token of appreciation for their experience and admiration for dear old Fr. Bede. (The author's hut was actually quite nice, built by a Swiss engineer who stayed one year and built the hut as a gesture of thanksgiving.)

Although the prayer retreats in Western New York conducted by the author were "spartan" in contrast to what many of the participants were accustomed to, they were also quite luxurious by most Indian standards. There were comfortable cots, modern

toilets and showers, and central heating. The facility was also just a few yards from the comfortable cars which had carried the participants there. In India, the toilet is commonly a hole in the ground or just the ground; a shower consisted of a bucket of water. The airplane ride to India is quite long but comfortable. Travel across the land of India by train or bus, however, can be a very exhausting experience.

Ashrams had small libraries. These libraries were very simple and sparsely supplied by Western standards. The emphasis was not on books or words, but the Spirit. Libraries carried only a few spiritual books mostly of Eastern origin. The emphasis was not on reading and filling the mind but on silence and emptying. The emphasis was on experiencing the power of silence within a community of like seeking people, led by the resident teacher as guide. Thus the two weekends the author conducted for this project offered a table with selected reading material. Since most of the participants had never been to anything quite like a prayer retreat, the resistance to such a model was quite low.

The weekends did include the Eucharist in morning group prayer and worship. This was done as a way to keep the attention focused on the inward Presence of Christ. It was also included as a way to express a desire to be as open as possible to Christ's teachings and guidance in the silence. Silence, as a cleanser of attachments, as noted above, can be quite painful and frightening unless the vision of a forgiving, loving Christ is in one's mind. It was felt that the inclusion of the sacrament was extremely helpful in the binding together of all persons there.

The author offered short talks on various aspects of silence. These were given at the orientation time, during short homilies in the group worship, meals, and evening sharings. The topics included; "Spirituality as Waking Up," "Ways to Use Silence," and

"Happiness as Right Thinking." He also suggested things to do in keeping silence; journaling, questions to ask oneself, and how to use a short phrase in repetition or as a mantra. He also emphasized the need to be gentle, advice he would find difficult to find himself at certain points in the first weekend's attempt.

The weekends were also planned with the four major temperaments in mind. (Part three, page 138) Expecting most participants to be Intuitive\Feeling types the worship and meditations were led in a conscious attempt to activate all the modes of sensation; intuition, thinking and feeling. Candles, incense, bread and wine were used in awareness of their sensory aspects. They also help relate to the traditions of the church. Simple forms of Hatha Yoga were offered. Time was also included for questions so that the thinking mode could be deliberately activated.

The first weekend did at times become much more difficult than some had expected, even with the frequent breaks for verbal prayers in worship, talks, readings, and the teas. After the first luncheon, one left because she just could not cope any longer. Another member departed hours before the last day's closing because of "other commitments." Others took it for granted that the director would not be serious about silence! When they discovered he was, they too found it quite difficult. Some began early to disregard the request for silence. This not only caused frustration for the author but for the others who had come expecting the periods of silence. One of the clergy became very upset with the whole thinking and methodology being offered. He was found the first morning in the woods with a group about him talking profusely negative about the experience, the experience having hardly begun!

Thus it became quite a test for the author to keep his own composure. Having taken their monies, which were needed to pay for the facilities, he was reluctant, not as a

guru would have been in India (ashrams never ask for monies), to simply ask the noisy ones to leave. So he finally gave up the expectation that he could force the silence. Rather, he just kept asking for quiet and silence much like a librarian in a noisy high school library. The worst offender, however, became the one fellow pastor. A very critical letter was later sent to the author, explaining why the weekend had been such a disappointment, with suggestions on how he would have run a "retreat." Fortunately he did not return for the second weekend.

So the author had many doubts. There were times when he felt the attempt was a failure, that not enough preparation had been made for the participants, and too much was being expected in such a short time. His wife, being the overseer of the kitchen, tried her best to stick with it, but she too could see that it was perhaps on the verge of collapse.

Participants were asked to fill out evaluation sheets on the last afternoon. They were to be reviewed during the closing session, which often seemed quite painful. Some were disgusted with others that silence, as clearly requested in the application and several times throughout the weekend, had not been observed as they had expected. The others then became defensive. Yet to the author's relief, most did express satisfaction with the event as a whole and were eager to give it another try in four months. Some even expressed that the experience had been a moving, powerful time for themselves. A young wife, in psychotherapy at the time, wept at the relief she was experiencing. She later wrote the author sharing parts of the journal she had kept during the retreat hours. The author left the weekend tired but with some relief and hope.

Four months later on a cold January weekend ten of the eighteen gathered again to complete the commitment. To others joined from the author's parish. One could not return due to an injury. Another canceled due to family conflict. The other four were either disinterested or in disagreement with the methodology being used. Thus, the ones who return were prepared to become involved in a more serious commitment. The first morning however, word came that the author's wife's grandfather had died. She left to return home for arrangements to be made. The kitchen, which she had so capably directed, had to be overseen by people just pitching in the best they could.

At the end of the weekend, it definitely felt that "it had worked!" In preparing for the closing and shared evaluations, there was a sense few wanted it to end. There was a strong reluctance to even break the rhythm of silence. Although few times had been given for personal stories or the normal "community building exercises," one could sense a strong bonding among the group.

For a closing exercise, participants were asked to share one image to help describe the feelings within themselves. This request, being made at noontime on Sunday, saw most members bringing something in from the outside; a pine cone, a leaf, a bird feather, a stick, a bird egg, a stone. One shared her images through written poetry. Another shared the image of snow, describing herself as a hardened snowball which was slowly melting into the "warm water" of the weekend.

Tears began to flow freely as people felt the presence of God in their lives and among the group. One stated how the rustic camp, long known but never visited, had become a "holy Place" in her life for the two weekends. There were requests for more such experiences, possibly week long in duration. The author drove home that night feeling relieved, blessed, and thankful.

Since then, the author has been asked occasionally to lead prayer workshops and retreats. Due to the commitment to finish the paper, he declined requests. He has led one for his own parish and expects to do others in the future. He feels comfortable with such settings and is considering such a ministry to be part of his future work. Certainly the ashram model made a large impact on him. The power being in silence, nurtured by frequent readings and prayers with leisure time for walks in wooded areas, is obvious. The future will reveal whether or not an increased ministry this type is indeed part of his call.

Evaluations, Comments, From Weekend One

The participants of each weekend retreat were given evaluation sheets to fill out and return at the close of retreat. There were a variety of responses and comments on which a summary of the first weekend is presented:

Beautiful surroundings – – I found the rain symbolically very cleansing – – the splendor the trees and rain is magnificent. The walk through the woods and pines is assigned the beauty, a burgeoning quality. The food was delicious, appealing – – thanks to your wife, I sent some growth in my ability to increase my silent times God.

I hope, as you did in the final session, that you stress silence even more. It is distracting when people talk around me, and I wanted silence. I can't help but feel a little unfriendly – even if that is not the case – the community feeling was good, but I came for silence. The structure of the retreat was wonderful! I feel I will go on doing many of the steps on my own, but I must confess I'm already looking forward to January!

Thanks to you for letting God through.

Would be good to realize at the end of the next weekend that we could be more silent. I know too, that even though I am alone, I need not be lonely. Thanks.

I'm struggling with this, but more for reasons other than I believe you think – – perhaps not. I'm sold on the value of time alone with God – – I'm just not clear yet how that fits in with being in the presence of others (God is in them too and I need to listen to them.).

Be more strict to people who were not silent when they should be. I was one that should have adhered to that rule better! It was a wonderful experience and I learned from it but it was different than any other I've ever had!

Downplay the social interactions. At the ashram (the retreat leader's word!), focus on silence, meditation, thanksgiving, with a focus on God/Christ.

I was thankful for the experience of having total silence when I chose. I also had a cabin and could divorce myself from others for my solitude when necessary. I expect to be able to apply to everyone on the outside world of this retreat – – the abilities to send love and positive thoughts by mental imaging. (I already did it all during this weekend.) I expect to stay tuned into that "solitary space" within

myself more. I heard answers to problems that I was working on in therapy this past week. I know had it not been for this silence and weekend, I would not have received them so quickly. I too assumed that I "should" get to know everyone here! My realization was – – the silence made it real easy not to be overly friendly with every single person. After I realized this, it was real comfortable! Your remark about "too many retreats with too big of highs before the fall" hit home with me. I've had enough of those in my life and enjoy the freedom I have experienced here.

The weekend was a good one for me. I work through my own moments of resistance and/or boredom, and inner silence. There were a few brief moments of joy and just good feelings and peace. They were short-lived, but were still convincing enough for me to continue the journey inward.

After several weeks passed, one of the participants sent the author a reading that she had written during the first weekend. With her permission, I share parts of it.

I want to forget,
But I have come to find the place where God is.
I know it is a place of pain, a lonely place.
I sit in a field, alone, eyes closed. Images.
Jesus is walking through the field, a small child clings to Him.
She shows Him that her hands are bleeding.

He goes away.
I am up against the brick wall of old lies—
"I won't believe that spiritual mumbo-jumbo."
But the child is starving.
A menacing voice says, "God belongs to them,"
Shadows of my adopted Irish Catholic alcoholic battered
Nightmare childhood, but then—
God belongs to no one. God is like the wind.

"The wind blows wherever it wishes; you hear the sound it makes, but do not know where it comes from or where it is going."
We are sitting on a porch in the rain. There is a place called the cave of the heart.
I want to see it.

I am following Jesus through a field. He lifts aside a curtain. I see a glade, a small clearing. Inside is a wounded deer. Both her hind legs are broken. I recognize her.

My mother broke my leg when I was a child. I broke the other leg when I was twenty-one, an age I never thought I'd reach.

Jesus says I must heal the deer. I ask Him where's He's been. "I've been taking care of her for you. I have kept her alive."

I am a nurse. I know how to take care of things that are broken. I hesitate. Outside it rains harder. I cry and cry.

The deer gets up and drags herself away through the rain. I must go after her, find her. I want to heal her. It is the first time I have ever wanted her. She is the symbol of my wounded soul. I knew they had wounded my body. How had they wounded my soul? "Oh Lord, make haste to help us...."

I walk. I am dazed and frightened here. I eat slowly.

There is no need to rush. I find a sign that says, "Jesus wept." I feel like the deer. I am walking among these people and there is no violence. A man hands me the bread and says, "This is the body of Christ." It is as if I heard it for the first time. Why do they hug each other? This astounds me. They are touching the wounded deer.

The evening meditation goes up and down my body, then breathing. It is like being surprised to find you're still alive after a beating. I stroked the deer. She is lying in a pool of blood, glass all around her.

When I was six years old, my mother broke all the kitchen windows. She says she will kill my baby brother, then me, then herself. What should I do? In terror, I must save him. I want to run away to someplace where children don't get hurt. I'm on the floor, frantically trying to clean up the glass and the blood, before daddy gets home. It will be my fault. I want to die before he gets home. He comes through the door. He throws me across the room. He says he will kill me real slow. It will hurt real bad. I feel like a piece of glass, already lined and broken it will shatter if you just touch it wrong.

The deer turns her liquid eyes toward me. Jesus is kneeling beside her, stroking her. I cry and cry. Tears are silent. There is Presence in the pain. There is a slight warmth. He shows me His hands. He takes me then, to each point of pain and touches it. He takes my hands and holds them. My mother put them in the frying pan when I was bad. He puts his warm hands on my broken legs. He touches all the bruise places. He unties me.

When I was four, my mother put a rope around my neck. She tied it to a rafter in the basement. I pray for my real mother to come and take me away. Just before I lost consciousness, I thought I saw an Angel. It was a neighbor lady who found me hanging there. Now it is Jesus. There is such sadness in the quiet.

Is there a God who does not sleep? I'm afraid to sleep, afraid to stop watching. I wait for my father's footsteps. They stop at my door late at night when my mother was drunk.

Now, I cry. I see Jesus in the clearing with the deer. There is light somehow. He sits up all night with her and keeps watch so that I can sleep.

In the morning there is peace and longing for peace. I am unable to talk. It is enough to be a life. It is like being beaten into unconsciousness – – when you wake up, at first you do not know if you were alive or dead.

Here in silence, I came to do exactly this: to enter memories, to be in the place of pain, to stay there and find it no longer destroys me. To find the cave of the heart, the place of rest where God is.

Evaluations, Comments, From Weekend Two

Evaluation sheets were again used the second weekend. The answers given were much longer than those from the first weekend. People felt more relaxed and confident. The author was somewhat concerned that the emotional high was too great and that participants might "crash" on returning home. Several have stayed in contact with the author through letters, phone calls and visits, and inquiries as to when the next retreat will be conducted. Several have shared their important resources with the author which he appreciates. Below are a few excerpts from the many comments given on the evaluation sheets.

Eating in silence makes eating a sacrament. Each bite makes me aware of the hungry and the ample supply of food.

Silent prayer is an ideal, easy to put off. Such retreats as these strengthen, through a lifetime, the desire and need to be faithful.

I feel that I am in a period of transformation. (Maybe we always are.) With Matthew Fox, I'm still working through anger and all.

I feel extremely motivated to continue a time of disciplined, planned silence. I have a real sense of the One, and a desire to put behind my individuality. For women, and persons with inferiority complexes (is that everyone?), it is a case of just getting self-esteem intact in time to lose self in the universal One nature of God.

(My appreciation) of silence has been deepened. I often feel hungry for it, but having an external structure as a retreat helps me, as undisciplined as I am to practice.

Since September, I try to ground myself first. Silence is an essential part of that process, in those times that I'm searching for true silence.

I've always been considered a good listener, but now I am much more tuned into listening for and to the Lord.

I've been given encouragement for practicing silence more consistently. The recognition of silence throughout one's day can be beautifully shared with His Presence has been impacted on my life.

I have become convinced in the last couple of years through a variety of experiences that I need to give attention to my inner journey. This retreat and my personal experience of the past month (depression) have emphasized my need. I need to take it seriously now.

I have not used much silence since September, partly because I had such mixed feelings after that first retreat. I guess I just wasn't ready and I was

confused by the use of silence in a community setting, which affected my personal response in combination with a very demanding time for me.

I feel I need to let go and just be, not try to fill the silence with speaking or reading or writing but just waiting upon God. I understand that I cannot manufacture or hurry the feeling of God's presence.

I feel motivated to make this a regular part of my day now. I realize I cannot remain centered on God if I don't do this on a regular basis.

From past experience I know God speaks to me. I desire to just be present with Him in a more intimate way. I desire to be with Him to learn more of Him. There are not always words to describe my experiences of contemplation. But since God is the highest Good, the sweetest Good, my experience can be nothing else. Now to go to the marketplace and resume my call in my direction for my life. Many things I am unsure of; I am only sure of my God and His love for me!

I feel awed with the grandeur, the wonderful happenings of our God! One who comes from a Roman Catholic tradition, I grew up being told not to frequent other denominations that might take me away from my Catholic one. I have the blessing to have lived long enough to see the beginning of Christian unity, where there are no divisions. As God says, until the day, "All my People are one!" The kingdom of God has arrived, awaiting all God's people to respond!

Before September I tried to meditate, but it frightened me. I saw images sometime, sometimes only tears. I stopped, until the September weekend. I am no longer afraid of what I experience when I meditate. Sometimes, though, it is hard to start, especially if I feel it will be painful. It seems somehow safer for me to meditate in a group of people than alone.

If I let too much time go by, I begin now to long for the silent time. I do not always have images or feelings or even thought. But sometimes, the stillness stays with me a little during the day.

Before September, I look for ways to "make" God real to me, but could not find a way that lasted past Sunday morning. In September after retreat, I found the presence of Jesus waiting there.

I do now have a "spiritual friend" that I can talk with. He is very dear to me. I talked with my minister. He is a lonely man and tries, but I'm not sure he knows quite what I'm doing. He is more into action than silence. The idea of a spiritual guide interests me. I never heard of this before.

Thank you so much for this time and place. I somehow felt "led" to come here.

I have not fully practiced the use of silence into my prayers. Through the two retreats, I have become more aware of the need for silence in my relationship with Christ. To be able to communicate with Christ more effectively, silence and meditation are necessary. This has been a positive outcome from this experience.

Rarely, in this rapid paced society, is there time to stop and step aside for forty-eight hours to focus on the most important aspect of life. I feel the prayer and silent weekends are needed by me to grow and sustain my relationship with Christ.

I experience more relaxed sharing in January. I practice more silence now, and so January seem like less silence and more sharing than in September!

APPENDIX

The Weekend Schedules

FRIDAY

- 7:00 Arrivals, packing in
- 8:00 Greetings, orientations, sharings
- 9:15 Night Prayer, retire

SATURDAY.

- 5:30 Rise for bathing, preparation
- 6:15 Hatha Yoga stretching
- 6:30 Morning group silence
- 7:15 Morning Prayer, Eucharist
- 8:00 Breakfast preparations, eating
- 10:15 Tea time
- 12:00 Midday Prayers
- 12:30 Lunch preparations, eating
- 6:30 Supper preparations, eating
- 7:30 Group sharings
- 8:30 Closing Night Prayer, retire

SUNDAY

- 5:30 Rise for bath, preparation
- 6:15 Hatha Yoga Stretching
- 6:30 Morning Group Silence
- 7:15 Morning Prayer, Eucharist
- 8:00 Breakfast preparations, eating.
- 10:30 Tea Time
- 12:00 Midday Prayers
- 12:30 Lunch preparations, eating, rest, exercise
- 4:15 Tea Time, Closing Evaluations
- 5:15 Closing Meal
- 6:30 Departure

India Itinerary, 1987

- Departure from Buffalo, New York - March 3
- Arrival at Iona, Scotland - March 5
- Arrival at Bombay, India - March 10
- Arrival at Christa Prema Seva Ashram (Puna) - March 11
- Shantivanam Ashram (Kulittalki) - March 17
- Arrival at Ramana Ashram (Tiruvannamalai) - March 24
- Arrival at Anjali Ashram (Mysore) - March 28
- Arrival at Bangalore Christian, April 4 College - April 4.
- Arrival at Brotherhood House (Delhi) - April 8.
- Arrival at Sat Tal Ashram (Sat Tal in Himalayan Mt.) April 10
- Departure from Bombay - April 20
- Arrival in New York City - April 21

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