



There is a spirit in the woods

17/25

Mary Lou Hess

Thin Places

December 2017/
January/February 2018
Year Nineteen, Issue 2
Number 93

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Thin Places, an ecumenical sampler of events and resources for spiritual growth, with a particular interest in the contemplative spiritual journey, is published by the Spiritual Life Community of Westminster Presbyterian Church.

Look for *Thin Places* at:
www.thinplaces.us or
westminstermpls.org/publications



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1200 Marquette Avenue
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Let Go, and let God . . .

by *Tesfa Wondemagegnehu*

Growing up in the inner-city streets of Memphis, raised by a single mother, immersed in crime and deviant behavior, I sometimes wonder how I survived and even entered this journey of lifelong music-making. Even though I grew up in a family full of music lovers, for most of my childhood I never really understood or appreciated its value, its power.

As strong and passionate as she was, my mother had a very difficult time steering me down a path towards success. During my ninth-grade year, my behavior reached a point where I received a Board Suspension. Because of my poor decisions that year, I was not allowed to continue in the Memphis City Schools' Transfer Optional Program and was forced to either attend my failing neighborhood school or enroll in a private school.

My mother, already distraught and overwhelmed by my lack of discipline, believed that sending me to the neighborhood school would only exacerbate my situation, but she strongly believed in public education. Her solution was to sign me up for an audition at the performing arts high school. I decided to take the audition very reluctantly, but it became the decision that changed my life. Dr. Lulah M. Hedgeman, Director of Choral Activities at Overton High School for the Performing Arts, accepted me into the program on probation, despite my checkered past. And suddenly—according to my mother—I was no longer a lost child on a path of destruction but a found soul on a journey of musical inspiration.

Within weeks, there was a significant change in my actions and thoughts. I began to consider the consequences of my behavior and even attempted to deter my neighborhood friends from making poor decisions. On a daily basis, Dr. Hedgeman inspired results—not through fear but through hope. She instilled a fervor and passion that still burns in many alumni today.

“Are we not called to communicate
a mystery of hope
to those around us
by the lives we lead?”

Brother Roger of Taizé

One of her favorite sayings was “Excellence is never an accident.” Phrases like this were used daily, and within weeks I—and all of her students—not only knew all of them but believed all of them. Dr. Hedgeman and I developed a very close relationship. She mentored me and encouraged me to succeed regardless of my environment. I would sit and listen to her talk for hours after school ended. On several occasions, she had to kick me out so I could catch the city bus home before it was dark.

Then, on December 8th, 1997, during that first year, Dr. Lulah Hedgeman died of a massive heart attack. I still remember the devastating loss as if it were yesterday. It was that day that I vowed to myself and to my mentor that I would become the greatest musician I could be, in order to try to inspire and transform people through music as she had done for me. I practiced hours a day and worked hard during eight straight years of college and graduate school until I got my opportunity to give back.

I often think about Lulah, her gift to me, and how God placed her in my life. This December will mark year twenty since she’s been gone. During that time, through several careers and many unexpected adventures, it became abundantly clear to me that words from one of the songs we sang at Dr. Hedgeman’s funeral, could not ring more true in my heart,

*“When it seems like the load is so heavy
and then it looks like the road
that you travel is so very long
remember God cares about your every problem
and God has it all in control,”*

words that also reinforce and echo my mom’s weekly—sometimes daily—advice to, “Let go, and let God.”

Every morning when I walk into Westminster Presbyterian Church, I stop, smile, take in a deep

breath, and remember how fortunate I am that the road that started on the inner-city streets of Memphis has led me to this place. I find myself inspired by all of the extraordinary ministries within these walls, within the Twin Cities area, and across the globe. I am humbled by competent, caring, thought-provoking colleagues whom I can call friends. I am deeply moved by the care, dedication, and talent of every one of my choir members. I am blessed.

Regardless of what the future brings, Lulah’s greatest gift to me was helping me to realize, even through death, that God has it all in control. I will always be deeply grateful for her and that gift.

Brief Bio:

Tesfa Wondemagegnehu came to Minnesota to be the Assistant Artistic Director at VocalEssence, then moved to Minnesota Public Radio as manager of the Choral Works Initiative, and is now Director of Choral Ministries at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Minneapolis.

He is also a founder of the Justice Choir movement and the director of the Justice Choir of the Twin Cities. Tesfa and his wife, Michelle, welcomed their first child, Aida, on November 1, soon after this was written. He may be reached at: Tesfa@wpc-mpls.org.

Ongoing Opportunities

Contemplative Taizé and Dinner

Gather with us for the beautiful, meditative chants from the Taizé community, led with piano, guitar, and other instruments. This contemplative service offers peace and simplicity before the start of the work week.

Following the service, we host a free supper for fellowship and conversation for all who wish to stay:

“I have been brought to the point . . .

“Little by little,
through the irresistible development of those
yearnings You implanted in me as a child,
through the influence of gifted friends
who entered my life at certain moments
to bring light and strength to my mind, and
through the awakenings of spirit, . . .

through all these initiations,
I have been brought to the point
. . . in which all is made One.”

Teilhard de Chardin, *Hymn of the Universe*
[with thanks to: *Friends of Silence* (May 2005 (Vol. XVIII, No. 5))]

Contact Us

Do you know of anyone—it’s free to all who ask—who would like to receive this ecumenical newsletter?

Do you know of an up-coming *Opportunity* that might be of interest to others?

If “Yes,” please contact Kristin Kieft at:
news@wpc-mpls.org or 612.332.3421.

If you have other questions or comments, please contact Marilyn or Alan Youel at:
thinplaces_us@msn.com

Second Sundays, 5:30-7:00 p.m.
St. Matthew's Episcopal Church
2136 Carter Avenue St. Paul

For information: 651.645.3058 or
www.stmatthewsmn.org or
rector@stmatthewsmn.org.

Advent Evening Prayer: *Living in Light*

As the days get shorter and as Christmas draws closer,
consider taking an hour for yourself, . . .

a time for Seasonal Readings, for Quiet, and for Music
with Local Musicians, . . .

a time in this busy season for *Living in Light*:

Four Advent Mondays, Nov. 27-Dec. 18, 7:00-8:00 p.m.

Sabbath House, 3228 Portland Ave. So., Minneapolis

For information: 612.822.2623.

Compline

Compline is the last of the daily offices. In keeping
with the earliest practices of the monastic
communities, Compline is offered by candlelight at a
time when the work of the day is finished, and the
quietness of evening begins to settle over the hearts
and minds of those gathered in prayer.

This is a short but moving service of ancient prayers,
Psalms, chanting, and mystery. Incense will be
present, as well as the Holy Spirit. All are welcome:

Every Thursday, 7:00-7:30 p.m.

St. John the Evangelist Episcopal Church,
in the choir stalls, 60 Kent Street, St. Paul

For information: church@stjohnsstpaul.org or
651.228.1172 or www.stjohnsstpaul.org.

Centering Prayer

Those new to “Centering Prayer” may wish to know
that it has its roots in Christian contemplative prayer
extending back at least as far as the Desert Mothers
and Fathers and that it takes its name from Thomas
Merton’s description of contemplative prayer as prayer
that is “centered entirely on the presence of God,” on
a “return to the heart,” on opening one’s self to one’s
deepest center.

Although its practice requires a measure of
discipline, it is absolutely not a “better” form of prayer.
When considered alongside spoken prayer—which has
been the heart of Christian prayer life since the
beginning—it could be seen as a minor spiritual
practice. But for many, it is a deeply restorative form
of prayer, . . . through silence, experiencing a deeper
awareness of God’s presence in one’s own life and of
God’s presence all around us.

Most retreat centers offer introductions to Centering

Prayer (go to any of their web-sites). The Minnesota
Contemplative Outreach web-site is a rich resource,
offering information on some of these retreats and a
listing of scores of Centering Prayer groups throughout
the region: www.minnesotacontemplativeoutreach.org.
Here are a few:

West Metro

Every Thursday, 7:00-8:30 p.m.

Mount Calvary Lutheran Church, Fireside Room

301 County Road 19, Excelsior

For information: laurieberickson@msn.com
or 952.474.8893 or www.mountcalvary.org.

Downtown Minneapolis

Every Wednesday, Noon-12:30 p.m.

Westminster Presbyterian Church, in the Bates Room

1200 Marquette Avenue, Minneapolis

Information: 612.322.3421 or www.westminstempls.org
or L.Linderscholer@gmail.com.

Central St. Paul

1st & 3rd Thursdays, 12:30-2:00 p.m. & 7:00-8:30 p.m.

Church of St. Stanislaus, in the Parish Center

398 Superior Street, St. Paul

For information: lindsay@ststans.org or
651.296.1913.

East Metro

Every Wednesday, 6:30-7:30 a.m.

The Benedictine Center, St. Paul's Monastery

2675 Benet Road, St. Paul

Information: benedictinecenter@stpaulsmonastery.org
or 651.777.7251 or www.stpaulsmonastery.org.

Exploring 12 Step Spirituality with a focus on the

11th Step: using Centering Prayer meditation

Centering Prayer is a method of silent prayer that

**Thou
shalt know Him
when he comes
not by any din of drums
nor his manners, nor his airs
nor by anything he wears . . .
For His presence known shall be
by the holy harmony
that His coming makes in thee
Amen**

15th Century Advent Poem/Evensong Hymn

opens the pathways to a deeper relationship with the God of your understanding, helps you progress toward a spiritual awakening and accelerates the healing.

Each monthly gathering includes two Centering Prayer sittings (with instruction), reading from the Big Book, presenters sharing personal experiences, teaching on 12 Step spirituality and impediments to it, and group discussion. All are welcome (as the group has grown, people have been coming from further & further away):

Second Saturdays (Dec. 9, Jan. 13 . . .), 9:00 a.m.-noon
Colonial Church of Edina, in the Fireside Room
6200 Colonial Way, Edina

For information: www.12StepSpirituality.org or
info@12StepSpirituality.org.

The New Contemplative Leaders Exchange

Last August the Founders of the four major Christian Contemplative Networks—**Fr. Thomas Keating**, Contemplative Outreach, **Fr. Richard Rohr**, Center for Contemplation and Action, **The Rev. Dr. Tilden Edwards**, The Shalem Institute, and **Fr. Lawrence Freeman**, The World Community for Christian Meditation—each invited five young contemplative leaders to gather with them at Snowmass for four days of prayer, discussion and celebration,

- expanding their common vision
- imagining the future of contemplative Christianity

Contemplative Outreach's October e-bulletin includes a report on the gathering. All four Founders and the twenty younger leaders were clearly invigorated—in

“ . . . for all that has happened to me . . . ”

“Our cup of sorrow and of joy, when lifted for others to see and celebrate, becomes a cup of life. . . . Mostly, we are willing to look back on our lives and say, ‘I am grateful for the good things that brought me to this place.’ But when we lift our cup to life, we must dare to say, ‘I am grateful for all that has happened to me and led me to this moment.’

This gratitude which embraces all of our past is what makes our life a true gift because this gratitude erases bitterness, resentments and regret. It transforms our past into a fruitful gift for the future, and makes our life [story], all of it, into a life that gives life.’

Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Can You Drink the Cup*

the words of one—by the strong sense of “connection, friendship, networking and support of the contemplative movement . . . and by our shared desire to be of service to contemplative practice and compassionate action.”

And another summarized his sense of what happened at the gathering, and of what is happening, by saying:

“Contemplation is radiating in every aspect of life and in every activity, from the simple monastic to the active life in the world, offering an opportunity to be grounded in love and to let things flow from that love...”

It's not contemplation in juxtaposition to the activities of the world, but contemplation as the hidden yeast that brings the fruits of love into all realms of life. . . .”

One-Time Opportunities

Christmas Eve Morning, A Special Service

When Christmas Eve falls on a Sunday, as it does this year, the regular Sunday morning worship service can seem over-shadowed by the anticipated Christmas Eve service. Stepping around this potential shadow, Pilgrim Lutheran Church [1935 St. Clair Avenue in St. Paul] is offering: **“God Waited, We Wait”—A Contemplative Service of Word Weavings and Music** at 9:30 a.m. Christmas Eve morning.

Enrollment is now open for The Shalem Institute's Four, Core, Long-Term Programs

It used to be surprising, when meeting new people, often the event's leader or facilitator, to hear again and again that they had taken their training at The Shalem Institute. That this no longer surprises is a testament to the vision and the enabling execution of Tilden Edwards and Gerald May and Shalem's early leaders and early participants.

Unlike the earlier days, these programs now offer a combination of on-line participation and residencies at Bon Secours Spiritual Center in Marriottsville, MD. But like before, what each one gives is both the content and skills that participation brings and the friendships and sense of community that each one engenders:

Transforming Community: Leading Contemplative Prayer Groups and Retreats Program

Are you called, or do you want to test a call to lead contemplative prayer groups and retreats? Do you want to learn from the Christian contemplative tradition and the wisdom of other traditions? . . .

If your answers are yes, perhaps the Spirit is calling you to consider Transforming Community, Shalem's contemplative leadership program. First Residency is May 9-16, 2018.

Going Deeper: Clergy Spiritual Life and Leadership Program

Are you yearning to re-connect with your original call and passion? Would you like help in listening more attentively to the Spirit in your life and ministry? Do you want support from a caring peer community? . . .

If your answers are yes, the Spirit may be calling you to Go Deeper . . . First Residency is July 10-17, 2018.

Nurturing the Call: Spiritual Guidance Program

Do you companion others in their spiritual journeys? Do you desire support and enrichment for this ministry? . . .

If your answers are yes, perhaps the Spirit is calling you to Nurture your Call with Shalem's Spiritual Guidance Program. First Residency is July 24-August 2, 1918.

Soul of Leadership Program

Are you seeking inspiration and encouragement for a new type of leadership, in a more grounded, heart-centered way? . . . If your answer is yes, the Spirit may be calling you to Shalem's Soul of Leadership Program. Various locations: Boston (Nov. '17—April '19), England: (Jan. '18-June '19), Tennessee (program ongoing).

Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation

3025 Fourth Street NE, Suite 22, Washington, D.C.

For information or registration for these and other opportunities—like **In the Footsteps of St. Francis and St. Clare, a Pilgrimage to Assisi** (April 4-14) or **Iona, A Contemplative Pilgrimage** (May 31-June 10) and more: 301.897.7334 or info@shalem.org or ww.shalem.org.

Advent Retreat:

An Exploration of the Twofold Adventure of Waiting

In this season of hope, this season for stretching our hearts, we are encouraged to be watchful, to be alert, and to wait in patience as we stay tuned to God's presence in our lives.

We will explore how the practice of waiting in our spiritual lives is twofold. One aspect of waiting is our waiting for God and the other is God's waiting for us. As we ponder the Advent scriptures, we find Mary and Elizabeth exemplifying this practice of waiting, affirming each other as they wait for the promise to be fulfilled.

Saturday, December 2, 9:00 a.m.-3:00 p.m.

**Center for Spirituality and Enrichment,
St. Scholastica Monastery, 1001 Kenwood Ave. Duluth**
and/or

**McCabe Renewal Center,
2125 Abbotsford Ave. Duluth**

For information or registration for this or other upcoming opportunities—like **Everything that Rises Converges, a Morning with Flannery O'Connor & Teilhard de Chardin** (Dec. 5, 9:30-11:30 a.m., McCabe Renewal Center): www.retreatduluth.org or

218.723.6699 or 218.724.5266 or
www.DuluthBenedictines.org.

Holy Wisdom, Mother of God: An Advent Retreat

Join us for a long weekend of chant, teaching, and contemplative practices to nourish the spiritual heart. Together we will explore devotion to the Divine Feminine in the Jewish and Christian traditions, particularly under the guises of Sophia, or Wisdom, and Mary, the Mother of Jesus.

Attention will be given to insights from mystics Thomas Merton and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin who acknowledged Christ at the center of creation and further beyond.

People of all spiritual traditions are welcome, especially the majority who affiliate with None. One prerequisite is a healthy curiosity toward what quiet prayer—within a framework of silence and solitude—may offer anyone on a journey:

Thursday, Dec. 7, with dinner at 6:00 p.m. (but come any time after 3:00)-**Sunday, Dec. 10, after lunch**
also:

The Episcopal House of Prayer, Collegeville, MN
and/or

**The House of Prayer in the City,
St. Mark's Cathedral, Minneapolis**

For information or registration for this and other upcoming opportunities—like **Spirit and Breath Cooperative** (Dec. 14-18) and **Monday Night Embodied Spirit, 10 Ways Chi kung** (at HOP in the City, 5:30-6:30 p.m.): houseprayer@csbsju.edu or 320.363.3293 or www.ehouseofprayer.org or www.ehouseofprayer.org/hopc.

Embracing the Sacred Time of Advent

This mini retreat includes contemplation, guided meditation and ritual to open your heart to the God within. You will enter into the sacred stories of this season and come to understand God's desire to draw closer to you:

In silence
learn to give of yourself
forgive others
live with gratitude.

Then, you need not seek peace
peace will find you.

Nan Merrill, *Lumen Christi*

Sunday, December 10, 3:30 to 6:00 p.m.

also:

School of Lectio Divina

Participants will experience an intensive retreat set to the rhythm of life at St. Paul's Monastery. Besides learning about lectio, they will meditate on a sacred text significant for them, participate in one-on-one spiritual direction, and converse with others who are on the same journey:

Friday, Feb. 23, at 1:00 p.m.-Wed., Feb. 28, at 1:00 p.m.

**The Benedictine Center, St. Paul's Monastery
2675 Benet Road, St. Paul**

For information or registration for these and many other up-coming opportunities: 651.777.7251
benedictinecenter@stpaulsmonastery.org or
www.stpaulsmonastery.org.

Blue Christmas Quiet

For many people, Christmas is a time of joy, a season filled with gladness and merriment. But for others, it is a time of deep sadness that can lead to depression, isolation and anxiety.

A Blue Christmas service, close to the winter solstice, the longest and darkest night of the year, is a time for quiet reflection and prayer, emphasizing Jesus as the Light of the World. As we come together, the lights are dim. But as the liturgy begins, a candle procession gently spreads the light through the gathered community. The songs, hymns and music are soft and reflective, led with simple instrumentation.

This is a quiet service of hope and promise:

Sunday, December 17, 7:00-8:00 p.m.

**First Free Church, 5150 Chicago Avenue, Minneapolis
Offered by Venite Ministries**

109 East 26th Street, #3, Minneapolis

For information about this and other up-coming opportunities: www.veniteministries.org
or 763.333.8976 or nancy@veniteministries.org.

Spiritual Practices and Disciplines

"The practices and disciplines are means of grace, not tasks to be accomplished or instructions to follow in order to grow in the life of faith. . . .

Our basic task is not mastery and control.

It is instead trust and grateful receptivity. . . .

Craig Dykstra, *Growing in the Life of Faith*

Struck by the Inner Light:

Voices of Love Near the Longest Night of the Year

Rumi scholar and interpreter Fatemeh Keshavarz and musician Jessika Kenney will create a deeply meditative evening that touches the soul and makes space for the liminal mysteries that unfold throughout this season.

The threads of hope that fill Rumi's lines will inspire us to reach beyond our knowing, . . . toward a vision for humanity that is beautiful, courageous and pregnant with God:

Wednesday, December 20, 7:00 - 8:30 p.m.

Wisdom Ways Center for Spirituality

Carondelet Center, 1890 Randolph Avenue, St. Paul

For information or registration for these and other up-coming opportunities—like **Lectio Divina: Mornings of Reflection during Advent** (Mondays, Nov. 27-Dec. 18, 10:00-11:00) or **The Open Page of a New Year: Writing as a Spiritual Practice** (Jan. 6, 9:30-3:30) or **Nurturing the Sacred Within: A Winter Retreat** (Jan. 26-28): 651.696.2788 or www.wisdomwayscenter.org or rdobias@wisdomwayscenter.org.

Spirituality of the Benedictine Tradition

This retreat—part of our ongoing School of Benedictine Spirituality—covers the sweep of the Benedictine tradition from the 6th century to the present, examining its impact on the development of Western monasticism and Christian spirituality.

Leading figures from the tradition will be introduced as spiritual guides along with the study of selected formative texts that they authored. The art, music and architecture of the tradition will also be represented:

**Friday-Mon., Jan. 12-15, 9:00 a.m.-4:15 p.m. each day
Spirituality Center, Saint Benedict's Monastery**

104 Chapel Lane, St. Joseph, MN

For information or registration for these and other up-coming opportunities—like **God is Speaking today: Are You Listening?** (Feb. 2-3) and **Praying the Psalms** (March 17): 320.363.8987 or www.sbm.osb.org or spirituality@csbsju.edu.

A Men's Silent Retreat: "Take Heart"

We are called to be bold in living our faith, which invites us to face the challenges of life rather than run from them. But do we have the wisdom and courage to change the things we can, to stand up for something greater than ourselves?

St. Paul reminds us, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (*Phil 4:13*). Join us at King's House as we reflect on our call to take courage and to act in the midst of the challenging realities of life:

Friday, Jan. 19, at 7:00 p.m.-Sun., Jan. 21, after lunch

Christ the King Retreat Center

621 First Avenue South, Buffalo, MN

For information or registration about this or other upcoming opportunities—like **A Women’s Silent Retreat: “Take Heart”** (Jan. 26-28): 763.682.1394 or lpolman@kingshouse.com or www.kingshouse.com.

Deepening Engagement: Essential Habits for Listening

Devastating news fills our screens, too many demands fill our days, and differences of beliefs and values fill our relationships. How can we increase our capacity to listen deeply – to discern what matters to us most as a community, a family, a person?

This retreat is designed for all those who yearn to deepen their engagement with what is most genuine in themselves, their relationships and their communities. During our time together, participants will learn different approaches for listening deeply to themselves and to one another:

Friday, Feb. 2, at 7:00 p.m.-Sat., Feb. 3, at 4:00 p.m.

Franciscan Spirituality Center

920 Market Street, La Crosse, WI

For information or registration for this and other upcoming opportunities—like **Advent Labyrinth Walk** (Dec. 7) or **Advent Weekend Solitude** (Dec. 8-10) or **Women’s Christmas: An Epiphany Celebration for Wise Women** (Jan. 4, register by Dec. 21): 608.791.5295 or skalas@fspa.org or www.FSCenter.org.

Reading Opportunities

Walking on the Pastures of Wonder:

John O’Donohue in conversation with John Quinn

Words—coming from gifted poets and writers—arising from both their art and their insight—somehow do more than communicate, . . . somehow seem to carry with them something that can somehow carry us to new places within ourselves.

For many, John O’Donohue was such a gifter-of-words. This January 4th is the tenth anniversary of his sudden death, at age fifty-two (shortly after giving what turned out to be his final interview, with Krista Tippett for MPR’s *On Being*, broadcast later as “The Inner Landscape of Beauty”). The words in ***Walking on the Pastures of Wonder***—segments drawn from John Quinn’s many radio interviews with O’Donohue over the years—perhaps his last gift to us, have by the nature of the book less “art” and more “insight” than books like ***Bless the Space Between Us***. But they offer bedrock reading, observations from one who lived close to nature and who looked upon life and upon the world, not with an agenda, but with love and with wonder.

The book is organized around eight of O’Donohue’s “favorite themes,” including: Wonder, Meister Eckhart, Landscape, Balance (the longest), and Aging. And then, within each chapter, there are from two to fifteen separate segments: The Gift of Memory, The Idea of God, Silence, Fear, Harvest Time, Coming Home, and fifty more. Because of this structure, ***Walking in the Pastures . . .*** could be a rewarding resource for a daily or periodic *Lectio* practice.

Here a few short excerpts, some of them John Quinn’s special favorites:

“I always think the question is like a lantern. It illuminates new landscapes and new areas as it moves . . . always assumes there are more different dimensions to a thought...”

“The kingdom of memory is full of the ruins of presence.”

“There is a place in the soul—which Eckhart calls ‘the uncreated place in you’—that no darkness, shadow, suffering or separation can ever touch. . . .”

As you grow older “time slows a bit, the outer draw to activity recedes and you have time for the more contemplative side of your life . . . to see the hidden depths of experiences that have occurred in your life and you really have a chance to weave a new shelter for yourself. . . .”

“Sometimes . . . people in a society . . . see the present as a massive fall from a once glorious past, where perfect morality, pure faith and impeccable family values pertained, without critique or alternative or any smudge of complexity or unhappiness. . . .”

And one more, here paraphrased by another reviewer, but close to the center of O’Donohue’s insight and interest,

“. . . the final balance between the outer physical human being – you – and the inner spiritual being – yourself – ...”

Afterwords: continued from last page.

welcomes all in its new lakeview location, but which also continues to be offered to (and to be used by) clergy, religious, and church professionals of all denominations free of charge.

With busy and productive lives, many may not have found time for a hermitage experience (but might wish to consider doing so). Those who have seem all to agree that hermitages provide a simple yet comfortable and secure setting where good things happen. And it seems, also, that the most deeply personal and deeply enriching experiences there come . . . when we put things down and give up control, . . . when we open ourselves to the silence and solitude waiting for us there, . . . when the apartness to be found there offers us the freedom to truly “let go, and let God . . .”



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Minneapolis, MN 55403-2419

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"Let Go, and let God . . ."
"The New Contemplative Leaders Exchange . . ."
"Being there . . . the hermitage experience . . ."



There is a spirit in the woods
1968
Mary Lou Hess

Afterwords: "Being there . . . the hermitage experience . . ."

The Hermitage at Clearwater Forest (established by *Thin Places* in 2005) is just settling into its new location: still in the woods, still secluded, but now with a lakeview, down through the trees, and its own dock and canoe/kayak. This move—first suggested by users of the Hermitage three years ago—brought back memories of time spent there and prompted a looking back through the Journal, with its hints at what people have experienced there.

It almost seems that a hermitage responds to meet people where they are, offering them what they need. Perhaps for all, it offers a time for stepping back and slowing down, for rest and rejuvenation. (A pastor reported, happily, that her church's Session, at her annual review, had "actually directed" her to schedule a "rest and re-creation" week there.) It is also, for many, a time for reading and for walks in the woods, . . . for writing or sketching, . . . for letting the mind roam, perhaps thinking about what might yet be. And it is a place for prayer. The hermitage's inherent atmosphere of apartness, of simplicity and silence and solitude—now, as it has since the days of the Desert Mothers and Fathers—seems to create a freedom to become quiet and still within, enabling us to open ourselves more easily to God's presence.

The oldest and most comprehensive hermitage ministry in the region is **Pacem in Terris** [763.444.6408 or paceminterris.org], begun thirty-eight years ago with a sensed call to "create an environment where My people can come and be alone with Me." It now has sixteen separate hermitage cabins, each simply but tastefully furnished. Guests are greeted when they arrive by the resident staff, introduced to their hermitage, provided with a basket of simple food (quietly replenished each day if requested), and then left alone (although available if needed). The residential staff notes that some who have come for the first time have been apprehensive about what it will be like, but that—over the many years—most have then found that at "the heart of the hermitage experience" is "finding a time to simply be" and that many then return year after year.

Other area hermitages are equally welcoming and, like **Pacem**, are fully available year round, each surrounded by the special winter beauty of nature, or the special beauty of spring or summer or fall: the Hermitage at **ARC Ecumenical Retreat Center** [Action Reflection Celebration, 763.689.3540 or arcretreat.org], which has been repeatedly recommended, for many years, by *Thin Places* readers; the Subiaco Hermitage at **Saint Benedict's Monastery** [320.363.7112 or smb.osb.org], which offers (for those who wish) the added opportunity of joining the monastic community in the daily Liturgy of the Hours; and the Hermitage at **Presbyterian Clearwater Forest** [218.678.2325 or clearwaterfrest.org], which