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## Opting for the Silent Treatment

Susan Pinker

Now that cellphones and wireless gadgets are everywhere the mental health challenge is no longer how to communicate but how not to. Those seeking stress relief or self-reflection can no longer expect it in the traditional places – their own sofas, a park bench or the doctor's waiting room. Instead they're opting for the silent treatment – literally – by going on silent retreats.

Karen Fish is a corporate trainer in Montreal who has gone on several retreats, and as we discuss their effects over lunch in her back yard a gentle summer breeze is cooling us off and blowing her flowers around. Despite the perfect day we are both under pressure. Fish is waiting for an important phone call that can come any minute and I have a deadline. It is just this kind of pressure that is acutely absent on a silent retreat. Yet retreats are not vacations. Often located in beautiful spots, the idea is to settle one's thoughts, to establish some internal order and equilibrium in the absence of external stimulation. "Becoming intimate with your mind" is how Fish describes the experience. "You know that saying, don't just do something, sit there? With all the things to do, to accomplish, I couldn't believe I was spending a month doing nothing. But it suddenly dawns on you how precious that is," says Fish of her month-long silent retreat at Karne Choling, a buddhist meditation centre in Vermont. Nine years and several weekend retreats later she still feels its effects. "It becomes a reference point of another way to be," she says quietly over her salad.

Going on retreat is an ancient tradition for devout Catholics and Buddhists, but the desire to withdraw from daily demands has caught on in the general public as a way to maintain mental and physical health. At the Villa Marguerite, a retreat centre bordering Rivière-des-Prairies in Montreal, 1750 people have gone on retreat over the last 10 months, the vast majority lay people. Sister Annette Walker, who administers Villa Marguerite for the Congregation of Notre

Dame, is now booking retreat weekends in 2004. So any one considering the silent treatment had better act fast. “You get so caught up with files and phones that you just don’t have the time to reflect,” Sister Annette says of her own motivation to withdraw.

It seems that even nuns feel the need to get away to keep their inner balance. At this year’s retreat Sister Annette and 17 nuns from Quebec, Ontario and the Atlantic provinces are gathering to reflect on their “right relationship” with the earth and the environment. Led by a Sister of Charity from Halifax, Maureen Wild, who calls herself a transformational educator, the sisters hope to escape what Wild calls “the addictions of our culture” and think instead about their role in the universe. Cultural addictions in nuns? Apparently. “Many of us are very much involved in the hubbub of the world,” says Sister Annette. “We’re all workaholics and we need to step out of our daily world, step back and reflect,” adds Sister Maureen, after leading the group in a outdoor, tai-chi-like “integration prayer” that involves bowing in four directions and invoking the day’s blessings and the blessings of the earth.

The nuns may be onto something. David Snowden’s recent book: *Aging with Grace: What the Nun Study Teaches Us About Leading Longer, Healthier and More Meaningful Lives*, documents what the epidemiologist at the University of Kentucky learned from an ongoing longitudinal study of nuns’ health. Although he didn’t look at the impact of retreats per se, simply the existence of a sample as large as 678 Sisters of Notre Dame between the ages of 75 – 106 in one community is remarkable.

Although going on annual retreats may be only one of many lifestyle choices that favoured the nuns’ longevity, there is certainly evidence that retreats have had beneficial effects for other communities – communities that share the same stresses. Retreats are known to be successful for people facing alcohol addiction; the local chapter of Alcoholics Anonymous books their annual retreat at Villa Marguerite. And groups of people sharing the same health challenges have also benefitted from really getting away, even if the retreat includes more focused discussion than silence. Groups of survivors of prostate cancer have been converging on a wellness centre in North Carolina for several years with many positive outcomes on their health and feelings of control over their disease (see James Swanton’s 1999 book on the topic). And a study published this past July shows that weekend retreats for cardiac patients at the University of Wisconsin not only resulted in lifestyle changes, but led to increased feelings of well-being, better anger management and a greater sense of spirituality.

It has long been suspected that religious faith or spirituality has a positive impact on health, but a health retreat affecting one's spirituality is a new twist. Taking the time out to learn more about stress-reduction techniques like breathing exercises and yoga, and "spiritual principles and techniques for healing, including meditation, prayer, forgiveness and acceptance of what is outside a person's control," gave the majority of the 72 participants a greater sense of inner strength and guidance and an increased sense of the meaning in life, according to study authors James Kennedy, Anne Abbott and Beth Rosenberg. These effects lasted for at least 4 to 6 months after the retreat, they report.

How long the effects of a retreat last is a good question. After all, if you are going to do without coffee, cigarettes and alcohol and without social contact: no telephones, television, internet or talking (some places don't allow newspapers, books or even eye contact with other participants) it had better be good. But some retreat participants say that long term benefits are not the point. "One doesn't do it for the effects, one does it for the moment," says Pierre Levy, a social scientist at the University of Ottawa who has gone on at least 20 silent retreats here and in Europe. Levy, who travels a great deal and describes his daily life as "complicated," says that the experience of a silent retreat holds indisputable health benefits such as a heightened awareness of the body's signals. Since practising meditation and going on silent retreats he gets sick less often and feels less stressed, he says. But the whole idea of a retreat is to stop running after results. "One isn't looking to gain something. It's like the sabbath. One stops working and pursuing goals. The silence is an oasis in the middle of the desert. It's a rest from constant interaction – you stop running and realize who you are," he says in a phone interview.

Although retreat centres tend to be run by religious groups and are experienced by many as a religious experience, you don't have to belong or believe to go. "One woman called yesterday who was going through a divorce and just needed to get away," said a spokesperson from Villa Sainte-Scholastique, the women's guesthouse at the Saint-Benoit-du-Lac ([www.st-benoit-du-lac.com](http://www.st-benoit-du-lac.com)). There are staff counsellors in residence and the opportunity to listen to Gregorian chants several times a day, but no obligation to avail oneself of anything but the silence and the beautiful view.

The unaffiliated and uninitiated are welcome at most retreat centres. But as many find the experience of a silent retreat difficult or go on retreats because they are in some sort of distress, the availability of counselling should be an essential component of choosing a retreat centre.

“It’s hard,” says Darcia LaBrosse, who accompanies her husband, Pierre Levy on silent meditation retreats. “Before I go I whine and complain. But in the end I appreciate taking the time. After three days of meditation I tone down, I’m less wired and I’ve gotten in touch with myself. If you’re sitting immobile for 10 –12 hours a day concentrating on your in-and-out breath, you discover things about yourself. It makes psychotherapy look like Walt Disney,” she says.

Describing the experience, Fish uses words like “wonderful” and “a relief,” yet says the silence feels downright uncomfortable at first, she says. “You don’t know what to do with your eyes,” she says, adding that in the absence of stimulation the repetitiveness of one’s thoughts can sometimes be “revolting.” At Karne Choling ([www.kcl.shambala.org](http://www.kcl.shambala.org)) Fish was surrounded with people and had a roommate yet was advised to act as if she were alone. Fish didn’t always oblige. In fact she seemed to develop a silent rapport with people after a month of communal meals and meditation. That’s an important aspect of the experience, she says. In Buddhism being amongst your community is called sangha, and is one of “the three jewels,” Fish explains. “It’s hard to keep what they call the right view if you’re alone. And it’s very powerful to be in a room filled with people who believe in the same thing,” she says.

Whatever your beliefs, there is a retreat for you. There is even a combination zen buddhist/Jewish retreat centre called Elat Chayyim ([www.elatchayyim.org](http://www.elatchayyim.org)). Rabbi Sheila Weinberg, who leads retreats there several times a year, says that the environment of silence and simplicity there “allows the mind to settle and clear,” and Ron Aigen, the rabbi of the Montreal’s Reconstructionist congregation, agrees. He has gone on an annual retreat that he describes as “a slowing down and an opening up that’s very restorative.” Whether it’s an affinity with the people around you, the meditative silence, lack of stress or beautiful surroundings, there’s no doubt that going on a retreat has healing properties that the public is just beginning to appreciate. “The connection to beauty and nature is central, according to Sister Maureen Wild, adding that it’s all about learning about being, not just doing. “We go out of our retreat experience deepened in our relationship to humans and the whole of creation.”

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