



HEMERA/THINKSTOCK

# My spiritual recharge

Counsellor **Frances Henley Lock** explains what retreats mean to her personally, from the perspective of being both retreatant and spiritual guide



‘A retreat goes beyond religion of whatever kind; anyone can make a retreat’

What does the word ‘retreat’ mean for you? For me, it means a time away from home and ordinary life to be able to reflect on ‘normal’ life and work and deepen my relationship with God. Jesus said: ‘Come away and rest awhile’ (Mark 6:31 Jerusalem Bible version) and I think it was Socrates who said: ‘The unexamined life is not worth living for a human being.’ Putting both of those together means a time away to rest and consider my life and how I am doing in my work. I put down all the people and responsibilities that I carry and move away to be just me and to develop who ‘just me’ might be. My sense is that other counsellors, psychotherapists and spiritual directors or accompaniers would value the experience, too.

For me, ‘retreat’ means several different experiences, from the led ‘quiet day’; to the weekend facilitated retreat, offering experiences from art to yoga; to an eight-day silent retreat on my own but seeing a guide each day. All of these offer time away from ‘normal’ life, and I come home physically, mentally and spiritually refreshed.

I value supervision in both counselling and spiritual direction, as a time to reflect and notice what is happening with my clients or directees and what is happening within me. Although not quite the same, a retreat gives me the opportunity to spend more time noticing where I am and also where God is for me.

I know that for many the word 'God' could be a problem and might be experienced very differently. God, for me, is a short form for that which is beyond me and yet is at my centre; the creator of love, the essence of everything. You may have a different word or words, but at the core of our existence, many of us seem to be using different words to express something similar. A retreat goes beyond religion of whatever kind; anyone can make a retreat. My sense is that it is on retreat that we can discover more of our spiritual selves, not necessarily our religious selves, which has a formal commitment to a particular faith.

For me, it is my relationship with God which has a special focus in retreat. I can take time to explore and continue to deepen my sense of God and my journey with God. There are the formal times of what I call 'prayer,' for which the guide will have offered me a piece of scripture or other text, sometimes a poem or even a picture, to help me focus for that day. I will sit with the material and see what comes; sometimes there will be much food for mind and soul, and sometimes it will not seem as fruitful. I find my spirit is fed especially by nature in a retreat.

Not having to live by an ordinary timetable means that often in a week-long retreat, I will get up early enough to see the dawn or sunrise. That may sound like a penance but I find a wonderful sense of newness in the world. The moment when the first bird begins to sing out of the silence of the night, is amazing. Not to live by my ordinary timetable means I can do what I want, usually when I want! I can take time to relax, to do relaxation exercises that I can't fit into my ordinary day. There is something very special about completely letting go, with no time

restriction at all, to allow my body and my spirit to just be. As a consequence, my mind becomes freer and I don't think about things so much as let them emerge. Sometimes, it is really important not to think at all, just to stay with my body and the freedom of my soul. What I have noticed, after some time of experiencing this kind of relaxation, is that when I start thinking again, my mind is clear and I can see myself and my life and, if needed, discernment, in a different light.

Going on a week-long retreat, for me, means to go somewhere in the countryside, hopefully remote but always with a long view. A long view of hills, the sea or across fields reaches parts of my spirit that nothing else can reach. Simply looking at distance gives a perspective that I cannot achieve in my ordinary life. Gazing at a mountain or hill that has been there, formed by movements of the earth that I cannot begin to comprehend, millions of years ago, puts my time on this earth into more proportion. Staring at the sea, watching the waves and experiencing the ebb and flow of the tide, the restlessness – but also the constancy – of the tides, gives a different sense of the movement of the spirit of God.

I need to walk, too; apart from the fact that I need the exercise – a somewhat neglected aspect of life at home – I need to walk to use my body in a more focused way. Yes, I do exercises both at home and in retreat

arrival, I free myself to become more aware of what is around me. I notice the birds, especially the gulls, flying and swooping and seeming to be very free on the wind. They trust the thermals to carry them and to hold them in the air. What do I trust? I challenge myself: what do I allow to hold me in the air of my life?

On a retreat, not so long ago in North Wales, I began to notice that the rocks on the beach were different colours. At first glance, they had all appeared to be grey. Then I noticed that there were purple, white, even pink rocks around. I gathered some of each of the coloured rocks and made a spiral on the beach, which came to mean for me a spiral of life. I am not sure that I can 'explain' it even now, but it is a symbol for me of the journey that I took that week. Having the opportunity and time to be creative, in all kinds of ways, finding pieces of driftwood on the beach or plants on the hillside and just observing them, can lend itself to reflection, as you have probably experienced. Drawing or painting, too, without drawing 'something', letting the crayon, pencil or even paints, do the drawing on their own, as it were, can give me an indication of how I am feeling before I can ever put it into words. There is again space and time to do this in retreat, without someone coming to ask: 'what about dinner?'

There are times, too, for pondering insights into difficulties, past and

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but there is something quite different about using my body to take me along the beach, to clamber over rocks, to ascend the hill or mountain (as far as I can!) or to observe the incredible life in a field. I need to walk to take myself a long way. That might sound very strange indeed, but I recognise that in ordinary life I am limited in the distance I can go, both physically and mentally and probably spiritually, too. By walking, in silence, without a specific distance or goal of

present. I can find myself in some very sad places, remembering people and situations that I might have given some thought to previously but recognising that there is more attention needed. It doesn't matter if I cry during the retreat; no one knows, except possibly the person accompanying me. It is a place, too, to be able to express anger about things and people that has not been able to be expressed before. I can find myself writing an angry letter;

I can throw stones into the sea or kick them on the hillside, in anger. I need to express the anger in my body, where it is stored and needs to be released. If I am very brave or very angry, I will shout, and having found the courage to do it, shouting is very freeing!

their vocabulary might be for that which is important as the focus of their lives. Being with a group on an individually guided retreat (IGR,) as a guide or accompanier, I recognise that it gives opportunity for people to go deeper into themselves than is normally possible. There is a great

with each other and are enriched by what others say.

Keeping a journal, no matter how short or long the retreat, is always important for me. I can reread it, look back and refocus on those things that were important during the retreat and which have more meaning given the passage of time. They are often encouraging in everyday life.

As you might have guessed, I value retreats of all kinds very highly. Quiet days and weekend retreats are great times to be with others to rekindle and nourish the spirit. Eight-day retreats are not just a time of being silent, alone and trying to be holy – they are much, much more than that. They provide time and space to allow reflection, wonder, and often discernment about what to do or where I could go next with my life. They are a time, too, to allow healing of past situations or relationships with people. I usually come back to everyday life physically refreshed, mentally stimulated – and spiritually recharged. For, if I think of a battery being recharged, given life/energy from outside to accomplish its job of energising the piece of equipment in which it is used, then that's a parallel of how I see my spiritual life. ■

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While facilitating weekend retreats, it is amazing to see people grow in such a short space of time

Being alone is very important to me; I prefer not to be in a group with others. I value not just the silence but also the freedom from being with others and picking up all the signs and signals of their journeys. Let me say quickly that I like being with others for most of the time in my everyday existence. As a counsellor and spiritual director, picking up those signs and signals of others on their journeys is an essential ingredient and fascination of the work. Isn't it the unspoken but clear signals of behaviour or body language that tell us most about what is happening?

In the last few years, I have had the privilege of accompanying individuals on their retreats. This can be a wonderful experience, often enabling the retreatant to move from being very tired, tense and full of the life in which they normally live, to being more relaxed, calm, with a freer sense of being, and often with a renewed sense of God and God's love. As others have done for me, I invite retreatants to reflect on where they are in their lives, the past, the present and the future, by using some scriptural or other texts, poems or pictures. Although they are offered material to help, it is always the retreatant who takes the lead in the time we have together. As with counselling and spiritual accompaniment, it is vital to stay with where the person is, to encourage them to express in whatever way they can, whatever is going on for them; and if needed, to help them to seek God or whatever

sense of support from the group, even in the silence. For the guide, being with someone for up to a week, means that one can notice the changes and reflect them back to the retreatant, in a way that is not possible in ordinary counselling or spiritual accompaniment sessions.

As well as week-long retreats, I enjoy those weekend retreats which offer a time of meeting and sharing with others. Although certainly not silent retreats, they quite often have silent times scheduled within them. These weekends are usually themed in some way. Some may have a particular way of developing prayer or personal and spiritual growth, while others can be much less directly spiritually centred but still be the basis of a retreat. I am thinking of singing weekends I have attended where we sang a number of 'spiritual' songs from different faith and spiritual traditions, including some Taizé chants. The groups are very lighthearted, and yet there is that, which I would call, a prayerful element to the weekend.

While facilitating weekend retreats, it is amazing to see people grow in such a short space of time. Participants sometimes come very hesitantly, not knowing what to expect. As the trust grows within the group, the retreatants become more confident in sharing the insights they have gained from the times of silence, centred around very simple themes. On some weekends it is possible for some one-to-one time with the facilitator, yet even where this is not possible, participants share

