

The Practice of Spiritual Retreat



“If I couldn’t take retreats? Oh my goodness. I couldn’t do it. I would be unaware. I’d be a completely different person.”

For Jean M., the practice of regular spiritual retreats has profoundly shaped who she is. (Jean asked that we respect her privacy, so this is not her real name.)

“For me, retreats are a time to pull away to spend time with God. I need that to fuel everything I do. If I didn’t have that I would just be running on empty.”

A regular pattern of retreats helps her in very pragmatic ways. “Without retreats,” she says, “I’d be making decisions based on personal preference, instead of a sense of call, a sense of being anchored ... of being grounded.”

“If I couldn’t take retreats? Oh my goodness. I couldn’t do it. I would be unaware. I’d be a completely different person.”

Stumbling on to the practice

Jean stumbled into a practice of retreats in her 30s, as a working mother with young children.

“The first time I took a retreat, I didn’t really know what a spiritual retreat was. But I definitely needed something in my life. I just didn’t know what.”

Her interest was sparked when she happened to receive a brochure in the mail from Camp Mack’s [A Quiet Place](#). “When I got the brochure, it’s like it was lit up: ‘A Quiet Place.’ And I said, ‘Oh, I think this is what I need.’”

She was so new to the idea of retreats that she didn’t know what to expect. “Even though I didn’t know what a retreat was, it felt very much like it’s what I needed. So I called and scheduled a one-day retreat. And I had to ask

the director, ‘What am I supposed to do? How does it work?’”

That first retreat was a positive experience, and Jean then returned to her daily routine. “So then a whole year went by, and all of a sudden it’s like this light bulb went on and I thought, ‘I should do that again.’ So I scheduled another retreat.”

“For me, retreats are a time to pull away to spend time with God. I need that to fuel everything I do. If I didn’t have that I would just be running on empty.”

Finding a rhythm

After her second experience, “It wasn’t long before I had this realization that I could plan these before I got to the place of jumping out of my skin! I could plan ahead for times of rejuvenation. When I came to that realization, I scheduled four retreats at once, and I spread them out through the year.”

Initially, Jean practiced day-long retreats. These were self-guided days of solitude. “As an introvert it seemed like it was pretty natural for me to get a sense of what I needed. I needed the quiet. I needed the solitude. But at the time I didn’t know that those were spiritual practices. I did a lot of journaling, but again at the time I didn’t know that journaling is a spiritual practice. It’s just what I felt like I needed to do it to survive spiritually, physically, emotionally.”

What happens on retreat

What specifically did Jean do on her retreats? “I would just go and spill everything out in the journal. The practice that worked pretty well for me was that I would show up on my retreat and go back over my journal since

my last retreat. It was a way of processing and looking back.”

During these reviews, she began experiencing new callings, what she calls epiphanies. “One time in particular I remember I was sitting on the couch and I literally jumped up and said, ‘I’m going in circles! I’m stuck and I’m going in circles.’ I just said that out loud. I didn’t know that that’s what you say when you need a spiritual director.”

Eventually these epiphanies led her to seminary studies and into spiritual direction. Out of this work she experienced a call to an entirely new career.

“At some point while I was taking some seminary courses I realized that what I was doing was spiritual practice, and it was essential. I needed to do it.”

From experience, Jean has learned that her best practice includes daily meditation, a full day retreat every five or six weeks, and a longer (perhaps week-long retreat) once a year.

“Every five to six weeks for a day-long retreat is the sweet spot for me. Four weeks is too soon. Eight weeks is too long. By eight weeks I start jumping out of my skin. I can actually get antsy inside. So six weeks is good. It is a life-giving practice.”

“I needed the quiet. I needed the solitude. But at the time I didn't know that those were spiritual practices.”

Where to retreat

Jean uses several retreat centers in the area, including Pathways. “I really enjoy the cottage. It’s a beautiful building. I take advantage of the trails and the labyrinths. I’ve been at the cottage in all seasons, even walking back there in the snow. When the outhouse is closed in the winter, I find walking all the way back up to the retreat house a little tedious. So I’ve used the three rooms that are downstairs. These are also beautiful spaces.”

She is aware of a trade-off with using a retreat facility that is close to home. “I sometimes see people I know on

the trails. So there’s not as much anonymity. But it’s also very convenient and accessible. And yet when you’re there you feel like you’re away. It’s such a beautiful place in the back with the trails. I’ve had some beautiful sightings of bluebirds while walking the labyrinth. There’s no lack of engaging with nature just because it’s close to the city. And so you can have a retreat day and then on the way home pick up some groceries.”

“I think back to when I first saw that brochure about retreats. Why did that catch my attention? I think it was because I needed it at the time. I think it's one of the ways God works.”

Retreating during the pandemic

The pandemic lockdowns have helped Jean appreciate what Pathways and other retreat centers provide. Early in the pandemic, all the retreat centers closed their doors and Jean lost her rhythm of retreat. “Yes, you can retreat at home, but it’s not the same.”

“When I first started practicing retreats, I was so depleted that they were a life line,” she explains. “During Covid times, when I haven’t been able to practice retreat regularly, I’ve been drawing on my reserve. I’m glad retreat centers are starting to open up again, and I can get back into a regular practice.”

Does Jean have advice for anyone who is interested in exploring retreats?

“If someone is thinking about a retreat for the first time, Pathways is a really good place to try it out. If you live in the area it’s not far away. And Pathways’ staff is available if you want someone to talk to.”

“I can’t imagine people not going on retreats. And yet it’s weird because I didn’t know anybody that went on retreats when I started. It just dropped in my lap when I needed it. I think back to when I first saw that brochure about retreats. Why did that catch my attention? I think it was because I needed it at the time. I think it’s one of the ways God works.”