

On Retreat

By Katie Hearn, T-C '05, chearn@towson.edu



Katie Hearn

“I am on retreat this weekend.” I sound as if retreats are a frequent event in my life, and they aren’t. This is my first one. The 10 of us are at the Shepherd’s Spring Retreat Center, a 220-acre farm on top of rolling Maryland fields and woods trailing down to the Potomac River and the C&O Canal towpath.

I have always thought of a retreat as connected to a religion and for the members of that particular faith. Shepherd’s Spring is owned and run by the Church of the Brethren, but they welcome others. We are a group of teacher/writers staying here for the weekend and the Elderhostel is coming tomorrow to spend a week cycling and sight-seeing. It’s an ecumenical group.

I like the idea of a retreat. I like the idea of taking myself away from my daily routine, from work and family life. I like the idea of being disconnected from technology, being unreachable for a few days. Retreats take us out of ourselves and allow us to think and be. On retreat, we don’t have to cook or clean up. We are free to write, think, read, walk, cycle, pray and meditate if we want to. Our rooms are spare, no pictures, which at first I found stifling, but now after one day, I find freeing—no stimulation.

We are so used to being stimulated by our human-made environment that at first our brains don’t know how to cope. We have trained

ourselves to block out because there is too much to take in. Here, sitting at my desk with windows wide open to the treetops, I take in, I open to hear wood thrushes, their fluty songs calling to their mates and great horned owls hooting near and far to one another. Everyone is mating—finding and courting their partner. Love and abundance is in the air. Pollen coats my skin as I bike through the woods. Wood thrushes fly ahead of me from branch to branch and then finally away. I am retreating into the natural world—into my thoughts and into silence.

Normally, we think of the word retreat as a negative. Armies retreat, people who cannot cope retreat, shy people retreat, the weak retreat. In our culture, the idea of purposely disconnecting from society—turning cell phones off, having no Internet, no telephones or TV—sounds like we have put ourselves in jail. On retreat, we must be suffering from boredom and isolation. How can we stand it?

Some people can’t. They don’t go on retreats. They can’t bear the idea of being disconnected from others. I asked my college undergrads why they spoke to one another, texted one another after every class and even during class if they could get away with it. They looked at me as if I must be mad. How could I not understand that communicating their every thought and plan for the day to another person brought connection

into their lives. As my 15 year-old daughter told me once, “You are nothing without a cell phone.”

When I was in college 35 years ago, all we wanted was to be out of contact. Out of contact meant freedom. Grown-ups couldn’t find us. They couldn’t check on us to see what we were up to. We made plans mostly in person or over the telephones in our rooms or pay phones outside. We never felt disconnected from our friends or our peers. But then we had more time, something contemporary college students and everyone in general doesn’t have much of. We were busy back then, but we weren’t rushed—that makes all the difference. We had time to talk and be together over lunch, breakfast and dinner, and in the smoking lounges and the library. In a way, we were in more contact, at least more intimate contact, with one another.

Ironically, we are more isolated today with all of our constant contact because we have to block out in order to maintain attention. Do you know how much effort it takes to answer a cell phone and discuss with a boss her questions about tomorrow’s meeting while unloading groceries from the cart, getting a discount card out of a wallet for the grocery clerk, keeping track of the children, getting out the check card to pay, putting the bags into the cart, collecting the children and walking

out to the car and all the while still discussing tomorrow's meeting? It's mind-boggling to think about it. And we do this many times every day. We have to block out in order to function. We make ourselves unaware. A retreat gives us a chance to stop blocking and to open. Perhaps that is why we need retreats more today than we did before. I know that the 10 of us here feel this is a much needed respite from our hectic, stress-filled lives. Maybe we will find awareness we never knew we had.

Yesterday I rode my bike down through the Shepherd's Spring woods and onto the towpath where mules used to walk pulling canal boats from Cumberland, Md., to Washington, D.C. I was aware that I was cycling over the same ground that men and mules walked over more than 150 years ago. A nice idea. The canal is dry now and filled with trees 100 feet high. I look closely at the edges of this once-canal to see if any of the trees could be old enough to have been here when the canal was thriving. A few huge gnarly, white sycamores look like they may have lived that long ago.

The Potomac is deep after all the rain of the past two weeks, and it flows mostly silent, dark and deep. It is a bit frightening when I am riding at the edge of the path 40 feet above the water. One unthinking move and I could plunge over the cliff edge and really hurt myself. I move in a bit.

Farther on, the cliff flattens out and trails meander down to sandy bits of beach. Two beach chairs sit side by side under a maple in the sand. An older woman, perhaps 70 and wearing red shorts, wades in the shallow, lapping river water. She turns to look at me as I cycle by. On the canal side are rocky faces rising 30 feet, a cave in one section, its opening big enough for a pickup truck to drive into. I wonder if it was once a sacred place to the Native Americans who lived here and later a shelter for pioneers and then travelers on the canal boats.

Suddenly, a huge dark brown fluff flies low across the path in front of me and lands on a dead oak branch 15 feet away. I stop, straddling my bike. No branches or leaves separate us. A great horned owl. I can't believe it. I dare not move, not breathe. My mouth, which had opened, stays open. I am afraid closing it will make him fly away. He stares at me for five full seconds. Then blinks and hoots once, turns his head and flies farther back into the woods, this time landing on a poplar, mostly hidden behind other branches and their leaves. He is looking at me, I know. I can feel it, but I can only see some brown which I know are his feathers. A small bird, swoops out of nowhere and dives at him, then another. Perhaps he is near their nest. After a few dives he flies up and vanishes into the leaves.

I am awe-struck. I have had to remain still and keep all of my senses open, searching and grasping for sound, color and movement in order to see and follow this owl's flight and perch. I am doing the exact opposite of what I do in my office where people are talking and the phone is ringing while I'm trying to compose an e-mail as another e-mail flashes onto my screen. I've become an expert at blocking out. We all have. Now in these woods on this retreat, I pry myself wide open, aiming to take in and explain.

Please send your comments, questions and letters to the editor at mwpletters@towson.edu