Voices of Sisters
Spirituality



(Unsplash/Aaron Burden)



by Sr. Jane Marie Bradish

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

October 10, 2019

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

It was spring of my senior year of college. Graduation and my first "real job" were on the horizon as well as becoming an affiliate (postulant) with my community. It was suggested those of us discerning make a retreat, and information was shared about a center quite popular with our sisters.

I wasn't a retreat newbie: my high school required a three-day retreat before graduation, and there had been retreat days for those of us in the very initial stages of formation. A couple of us made arrangements to go. Before I knew it, it was time for retreat, so I packed a few clothes, toiletries, a blank notebook, and off we went.

As we turned off the main road and approached the retreat center it didn't take long for me to wonder what I had gotten myself into. We were greeted with a less than comforting road sign: "No Outlet"!

After grabbing my bag and finding my room, I started people-watching. I saw other retreatants arrive with multiple bags full of books, recordings, puzzles and God only knows what else. I started to wonder, "Why all the stuff?" and "Did I miss something?" Within the first half hour of arriving I was pretty sure I had made a terrible mistake.

The group gathered and the week was presented: general information about the space, shared responsibilities, meals, meet the staff and directors, prayer opportunities, and finally expectations — silence. Suddenly I started to understand the bags of "stuff" I saw so many bring as well as my personal and still unspoken wonderings. Silence can be scary. What will I hear? Or even more frightening to me, what if I hear nothing? Since I had come with others I knew I couldn't leave (I would find out later that they did).

And so we began. I met my director who asked some general "getting-to-know-you" type questions and sent me off with a Scripture passage with which to spend the night. So far so good. I was eager to have my evening meal and settle into bed after the long car ride.

After prayer and breakfast the next morning I again met my director.

This session was longer and way more intense. She asked all kinds of questions, and I sat there dumbfounded and silent. What do you mean "How is God with me today?" or "Where is God calling me to be during this time?" I walked out of our session

totally confused — I had no clue. I didn't have answers and that freaked me out. Back to my earlier fears: "What will I hear, or what if I hear nothing?"

I was so determined to hear something — come on, God! I spent the rest of the day exploring. I found the chickens right away and enjoyed their scratching and parading around, their antics made the rooster's wake-up call a little more bearable. Exploring further I found the neighborhood cows grazing and chewing their cud without a care in the world. I crawled up on a stack of hay bales to simply sit and watch the sky.

The whole time my director's questions were with me, and I still had no answers. After a nap, liturgy and an evening meal I decided to skip night prayer and head toward the lake to watch the sun set. The water had just the slightest movement, and the birds gradually sang themselves and the world to sleep as it got darker and darker. When the bugs came out I decided it was time to go inside, turning around, I saw a breathtaking sunset. In my struggle with and distraction by those questions, I hadn't realized I was facing east instead of west!

Advertisement

Sensing she may have spooked me, my director backed off a little the next day. The questions still came, but somehow they were gentler and had varied approaches to get me where I needed to be (I'll be honest, she worked hard that week).

While I still wandered the property and enjoyed the wonders of nature, my blank notebook now traveled with me. I noted everything: observations, feelings, questions, experiences and wonderings. Before bed each night I looked back over the day's jottings. I didn't realize it then, but through my wanderings and jottings I was hearing something.

By the end of the week I knew coming to retreat without "stuff" was probably the best thing I could have done, although it would take me years to admit that. You see, I would have used "the stuff" to keep me from silence, to distract myself, instead of letting myself sit with the questions, instead of searching, instead of really coming into silence.

Fast forward to now. No matter where the retreat center is or who the director/presenter is, my approach is the same: clothes, toiletries and a blank notebook. But now it's a choice, it's not that I didn't know any better. Be careful, the

Spirit is sneaky.

[Jane Marie Bradish is a member of the School Sisters of St. Francis based in Milwaukee. Her ministry has been in secondary education; currently, she teaches theology and is the academic programmer for a large, urban, multicultural high school.]