

LIGHT FOR THE WAY

Seeking Simplicity,
Connection, and
Repair in a Broken
World

THE EDITORS OF
SOJOURNERS

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Rose Marie Berger is senior editor for *Sojourners* magazine. The editorial team at *Sojourners* includes Mitchell Atencio, Jenna Barnett, Josiah R. Daniels, Mariela Esparza, Josina Guess, Tyler Huckabee, Hojung Lee, Darren Saint-Ulysse, Julie Polter, and Betsy Shirley.

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Introduction

Welcome. We're glad you are here.

If you have picked up this book or opened it on your reader, there is a reason. Something in you is seeking an authentic spirituality—something deeper, wider, more truthful, and more generous than what you may have grown up with or are experiencing in the surrounding culture. Maybe you are worn out by grief, exhausted by work, or sick of the politics of hate and division. Or maybe you have decided that no one is going to steal your joy, hijack your happiness, or trivialize your truth. Welcome. You are in the right place. This is the right book.

More than fifty years ago, a group of students at a Christian seminary were having an experience similar to yours. They were studying the Bible, reading the newspaper, and throwing house parties. Many of them were from conservative Christian families, but the lessons learned there didn't prepare them for a world that was changing rapidly. When they read their Bibles, they paused on certain passages. From the prophet Micah: "Do what is fair and just to your neighbor, be compassionate and loyal in your love, and don't take yourself too seriously—take God seriously." From Jesus: "I was hungry and you fed me, I was thirsty and you gave me a drink, I was homeless and you gave me a room . . ." and "You cannot serve God and wealth." From the father of a sick child: "I believe; help my unbelief!"

Those seminary students wanted to expand the conversation. They put their questions into a magazine that eventually took the name *Sojourners*. They landed on this name because they felt like strangers in their own country. The questions they

asked about war and peace, white supremacy, economics, care for the earth, the dignity of women, the joy of children, and what daily habits *actually* bring us closer to God were spread across the magazine pages—sparking a conversation that goes on today in our print and online publications. *Sojourners* is less interested in “sin management” and more interested in prompting conversations that help us become more who God made us to be.

Today, *Sojourners* is a place where we put faith into action for social justice. We cherish the perspective of the marginalized—whether from communities that are economically poor, or communities made vulnerable because of gender or sexuality or immigration status, or those suffering from state or social violence, or the marginalized earth community itself. It is in these communities that one can find the front lines of liberation. Liberation of the mind, body, and spirit. But liberation and finding one’s true self are not for the self alone. Liberation is always for the service and mutual aid of others.

Sojourners are ordinary people trying to follow Jesus in a complex and changing world. We have one foot in the church and one foot in social movements—so we are constantly tripping over our own feet! But we try to own our mistakes, make amends, and pick ourselves up when we fall. We are constantly changing, while holding fast to our faith and our practices. This book is one way of sharing our conversations with you.

The essays in this collection—some very short and some more in-depth—are the fruit of generations of “question askers.” Is it possible to be truly, deeply quiet in this world? Is holy rest even an option in a culture that works us to exhaustion? Does the way I live really matter as long as I try to be an honest person? Do churches do any good? What do trees know that people have yet to learn? Can different religions work together? Why might an agnostic go back to church?

What are your questions? If you are ready to step onto a road that started before you and will go on after you, then read on. Enjoy the stories. Laugh at the humor. Mark up what makes you angry or afraid. Underline what makes your soul sing and share it with a friend. Trust your own wisdom and be curious about the experiences of others.

Welcome. There *is* a light blazing in the darkness. Let's step toward it together.

—Rose Marie Berger
Senior Editor, *Sojourners*

Chapter 1

How to Be Alone

Contemplative Practices

In an era of epidemic-level loneliness, why is it a good thing to spend time alone? To be alone with God is very different from the loneliness of not being known, seen, or recognized. Growing our souls depends on practicing spiritual openness to the Mystery that created us. Whether fumbling through centering prayer, as Julia Alvarez describes in this chapter, living deeply into fifteen-hundred-year-old Benedictine practices, or teaching contemplation in prisons, hospitals, and shelters, we must constantly be refreshed by the divine. But is a contemplative life still possible?, asks Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove. At Sojourners, we continually experiment with new ways to grow our souls.

How to Be Alone

Alexander Jusdanis

Long before Karen Fredette became a Fredette, she was Karen Karper: a girl from Kent, Ohio, who everyone thought would become a nun.

The Karpers were devout Catholics. Two of her uncles were priests, and many of her relatives had entered monasteries. But Karen resisted, even if, as she admits now, it was mostly because she didn't want to wear the habit uniform. Then, as a teenager, she had a teacher—"a lovely young nun"—who changed her mind.

"I thought, well, if she can do it, I can do it," she said.

Once out of school, Karen entered a monastery of Poor Clare Nuns in Canton, Ohio.

"My goal was to deepen my prayer life," she said. "And while I could say that glibly when I was seventeen, I really had no idea what I was getting into."

She would stay there for thirty years. At first, she loved the quiet of the monastery, and how the rigid schedule fostered her spiritual development. But she gradually realized that it wasn't enough for her. She was always with her fellow sisters, when they prayed, when they worked, when they ate, and when it was time to relax.

"There's nearly always someone at your elbow," she said.

Late in her time in the monastery, a bad fever left her bed-ridden and alone. It was then that she got her first taste of true solitude.

“The more I let myself experience it, the more I wanted it,” she said. “It’s like chocolate candy.”

Inspired, Karen decided to leave monastic life. She found a rent-free cabin a few hours away in Colt Run Holler, West Virginia. She moved in with just a hundred dollars and an old Ford Bronco. Alone in the woods, she became a hermit.

Like Karen, none of us had any idea what we were getting into when we paid our last tabs or checked out our last library books and shut our doors many months ago [at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic]. But I had a hunch that hermits like Karen, who have eagerly chosen an isolation more intense than any lockdown, might be able to help us through. Karen has become something of a spokesperson for hermits, coediting a newsletter on hermetic life and writing a number of books on her experiences. I got in touch with her, hoping she might be able to teach us—or rather, those of us with the privilege of staying home—how to be alone.

It is a skill we seem to have left behind. We live at a time when we can talk to just about anyone at any time in any place. And once constant communication becomes a habit, it’s almost impossible to stop. Every pause, every moment of downtime, becomes an occasion to check our email.

In this ultra-social world, those who choose to opt out can almost seem like deviants. Consider the stereotypical hermit: a silent, frowning, and possibly bearded man whose misanthropy drove him away from society and forced him to brood his days away in some dark grotto.

But this is not Karen. She didn’t choose hermetic life because she hated people. Rather, solitude was a way to free herself from herself.

When she moved into her hermitage, she spent her days walking the wilderness, cutting wood for the fire, writing, and praying. In all she did, she said she tried to open up to “whatever God was saying.” Not the “old white man in the sky with a

long white beard,” she clarified. “The grace-life that is in every green thing, every rock, every tree, every person around us. And we can’t see that unless we are less absorbed with what’s going on inside us.”

It is a foundational—and perhaps paradoxical—truth about the eremitical life: One must be alone to still their ego.

In solitude, self-image fades away, Karen explained.

“Something somehow knocks it up, gives it a ‘swift kick in the pants,’ like my dad used to say,” she said. “You realize, *that’s not me, and what I’ve lost, I don’t need.*”

Shortly into our conversation, I felt a sense of calm—not because everything was going to be okay (because it wasn’t), and not because I suddenly was okay with a lack of social life (because I wasn’t). But through the phone, I felt the peace of the decades she’d spent in stillness and silence. It was a gift she could bestow upon me without losing anything of her own.

When I first emailed her, she responded with delight at the chance to share some of the wisdom that has come from being alone, though she didn’t hesitate to dispute my choice of words.

“You know, you use the word ‘isolation,’ and I’m not happy with that word,” she told me. “I like the word solitude better. I think of solitude as a life-giving experience.”

I knew what she meant. I was very shy growing up. I was always confused about what people expected of me, and I broke down the minute I felt I’d done something wrong. I often pretended to be sick to avoid going to school and facing the implicit demands of teachers and classmates. As many anxious, unconfident children do, I turned to books to experience the pleasures of social life without the then-overwhelming cost of participation. Solitude was my life-saver.

But I never went full hermit; I never stopped wanting to be with people. Eventually, I forced myself to figure out how to make friends, and now I’m glad to have quite a few good

ones. Even though I'm occasionally struck by the desire to leave everything behind and find my own cabin in the woods, I don't believe that I could survive very long without friends and family.

Surprisingly, Karen didn't believe it either, at first. The first few years in the monastery, she said, she stood around waiting for a sign from God that she should go back home to her family. The first Thanksgiving was especially tough. Her relatives always gathered at her family's big house to celebrate.

"I remember standing in the cell, realizing that all my family is going to be there tomorrow, and I wasn't," she said. "I could hardly bear to visualize that."

She said she felt like throwing open the window and running back home. But she didn't.

"You survive it," she said, referring to the pain of separation. "You become a stronger, better person."

This month, across the country, people have begun to reunite with friends and family—not because it's necessarily safe to do so, but because people are tired of being apart, and because we were never granted the financial means to live otherwise.

Our eagerness to be with one another might explain a big twist in Karen's story.

Four years after she commenced hermetic life, she started working—hermits need money, too—in a parish rectory in a nearby town. Over the next two years, she developed a friendship with the priest, Paul Fredette. One late afternoon, he asked if she wanted to go pray in the chapel.

"I was very glad to do that," she said. She'd always felt a little awkward praying around others. But "sitting next to Paul," she said, "I felt not the least bit self-conscious."

Beside him, she said that she felt the same inner strength and quiet as she did alone. She and Paul got married and decided to leave the parish, "because too many people were going to be horrified."

“You know,” she said. “Look at the father running away with the sister!”

Karen and Paul Fredette moved to the Smoky Mountains of North Carolina, where they live today.

After decades of self-imposed solitude, she became something of a community organizer for hermits through her and her husband’s newsletter, “Raven’s Bread.” Sent by mail and email, it consists mainly of essays on the hermetic life submitted by some of the 1,160 subscribers, bringing together a dispersed community of people who have otherwise fled community. She’s also written several memoirs recounting the lessons of her own journey into solitude.

Karen no longer considers herself a hermit, but she and her husband remain committed to her original hermetic ideals by not seeing friends or going to restaurants or the movies.

“We live a very quiet, hidden life,” she said.

Perhaps the desire for others, in one way or another, never fully leaves. Loneliness, says Karen, is simply a fact of life.

“It’s just one of those inevitable things that we all have to work our way through. And if you run from it, it’s not going to get any better. You just have to sit down and be with it,” she said. “You’ll discover that there is life within you, and there is life around you, and it is teaching you all sorts of things—if you are listening.”

If you’re overcome by the pain of loneliness or boredom, she advised, don’t just dissociate into a screen. Instead, throw yourself into a coat closet and shut the door. “Just stand there in the dark and the quiet, and let it pour into you for just fifteen minutes,” she said.

“You could just come out a different person.”

Alexander Jusdanis was a writer with work in *The Outline* and *Dissent* when this article appeared on sojo.net on June 22, 2020.