

Regaining Your Spiritual Poise

How Christians Can Regain Balance and
Meaning in Their Lives through the Practice
of Retreat and Christian Spirituality

ROB WINGERTER



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Preface

Mark Twain once observed, “A classic is a book everyone wants to have read, but no one wants to read one.” I think there is a corollary in the Christian life. Everyone wants to have led a dynamic, sold-out, impactful Christian life—but no one wants to lead one. Most Christians have a conversion experience that starts off their Christian lives with a great deal of energy and focus. Much like a rocket ship, they blast off with great vigor and enthusiasm in their newfound faith. However, just as the gravitational field of the earth pulls the rocket ship back toward the launch pad, the Christian is pulled back to unbelief (or at least toward lethargy) by the cares of this world. Sin, boredom, cultural attractions, doubt, and fear all rob the Christian of the energy needed to lead the Christ-centered life God planned for His people.

I won’t pretend that this one small book written by a layman will provide all of the insights necessary to inspire every professing Christian to become a spiritual giant. However, I do hope in some small way that some of the observations contained herein will be helpful in moving Christ seekers just a little further down the path of spiritual maturity. My primary focus will be on recapturing an all but forgotten practice of personal retreat. In particular among the American Protestant community, the concept of taking time out of one’s “busy schedule” to spend time in isolation for the purpose of prayer and contemplation seems archaic and unappealing. Even among those churches that have

men's or women's "retreats," these retreats almost invariably take the form of corporate seminars with guest speakers who often give self-help messages. This lack of understanding of true retreat robs the average Christian of the energy source necessary to sustain one through life's spiritual ups and downs.

By background and training, I am a certified public accountant and an attorney. To say that I am left-brain dominant would be an understatement. As such, when addressing the subject of retreat, I won't be approaching the idea from a touchy-feely perspective. To thine own self be true. Rather, I have tried to lay out the idea of retreat from an historical and practical perspective. Under the general theory of informing people by telling them what you are going to tell them, then telling them, and then telling them what you told them, I have approached the topic of retreat using the following approach.

Chapter one will lay the groundwork for why retreat is so necessary in our lives. One of the most succinct summations of the need for retreat in our lives comes from the English Christian mystic Evelyn Underhill. She stated,

We come [in to retreat] to seek the opportunity of being alone with God and attending to God in order that we may do his will better in our ordinary lives. We come to live for a few days the life of prayer and deepen our contact with the spiritual realities on which our lives depend—to recover if we can our spiritual poise. We do not come for spiritual information, but for spiritual food and air—to wait on the Lord and renew our strength—not for our own sake but for the sake of the world.¹

If spiritual retreat is so necessary, then why is it so lacking in the Christian world today? That will be the focus of chapter two of the book. Notice that I focus on its absence in Protestant world today. That is not to say that retreat as a spiritual practice is totally lacking in the Christian world. A quick search of Christian retreat centers on the Internet will list hundreds of retreat centers in the United States. However, a cursory

review will tell you that the vast majority of those listed (in excess of 80 percent) have a connection to or were founded by one of the Roman Catholic holy orders. Chapter two will explore this phenomenon as well.

Chapters three and four will explore the monastic movement. Beginning with the early desert fathers of the fourth century through the later monastic movements of the Middle Ages, we will examine the call to live lives with a singular focus on spiritual connectivity to our Lord and Savior. A cursory observation may be that the monastic movement would have little applicability in the modern Christian's life. My goal is to demonstrate that the calling of these early monks and sisters in reality is the same call we are answering in our own limited way when we enter in to retreat.

Chapter five will explore the topic of Christian spirituality. In particular it will examine the lives of select men and women who exhibited a life of focused intensity of the triune God.

In chapter six there will be a short overview of those classic spiritual disciplines most appropriate to practice in a retreat setting. This does not mean that these disciplines can't be practiced outside of retreat. However, without some insights into the activities to be undertaken when someone makes the time in his or her schedule to "get away," there is always the potential that a spiritual retreat will just turn in to a weekend away.

For too many western Christians, the idea of practicing the spiritual disciplines in a retreat scenario may have the negative connotation of Eastern mysticism and feel taboo. The reality of the matter is that Christian mysticism or spirituality has a deep history in the Christian tradition. Unlike Eastern religious mysticism, which is often designed to empty your mind (and thus let anything in), Christian meditative practices are designed to bring singular focus on our God and Savior.

At this point, most discerning Christians should ask the legitimate question: "This all sounds good, but what does the Bible have to say about the idea of retreat?" The short answer is "A lot." Jesus Christ himself set the pattern for retreat and that will be the subject of chapter seven of the book.

Now, presuming I have you convinced that you want to make spiritual retreats a part of your life, chapter eight will address the question of “How do I get started?” Chapters nine and ten will address the practical side of the structure and potential content of your retreat.

Although this book was written to extol the benefits of retreat, the real goal is to encourage individual to keep the spirit of retreat alive throughout the year. Chapter eleven will address this topic.

Finally, in chapter twelve, I will discuss some personal history and why I felt compelled to write this book. I will review the story of Mahseh, the Christian retreat center that I helped found and now work at. The lessons learned over the last seven years form the basis for most of the content of this book. The story of Mahseh is one that confirms to me of God’s desire to act directly in each believer’s life to see that individuals grow and mature in their faith.

My sincere hope for all who read this book is that it be half as edifying for them as it was for me to write it. I also trust that the experience of spiritual retreat will allow readers to grow in their own personal walks of faith and thereby enhance their lives and the lives of those around them.

Rob Wingerter
October 2013

Chapter 1: Retreat—Who Needs It?

Think back to your moment of conversion. If you are like most people, there was an initial period of exhilaration that came with the realization that you were now a child of God. There was a feeling of relief of guilt, spiritual renewal, and love for our Savior that was both humbling and invigorating. Believers have a sense of joy (to borrow a phrase from C. S. Lewis) in their lives. Many of us determine to lead lives indicative of our new relationship. We increase or begin our church attendance, participate in more Bible studies, pray with more fervency, and attempt to lead lives that honor God.

But then what happens? Slowly, old habits return. Church attendance becomes less regular (or less meaningful). Time in prayer and study of the Word begins to wane. We more frequently catch ourselves operating with a worldly mind-set instead of leading lives that have an eternal perspective guiding them. Just like a rocket ship that blasts off with great energy and power, the inevitable pull of gravity brings us back toward practical unbelief. Is this just the way it is? After all, we are just human.

If we look to some of the root causes of this gravitational pull toward unbelief we will be better equipped to counteract this force. It will also be more evident how the practice of retreat can be a critical element toward recovering this lost joy of our initial launch into our Christian faith.

Root Causes: Sin

Undoubtedly the core issue that impacts our ability to lead lives as committed Christians is the fact that we are still fallen creatures, and as such, sin is still prevalent in our lives. This sinful condition is not just a problem for the spiritually immature. Take a look at what Paul had to say about sin in his life in Romans 7:14–23.

For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin. For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law and that is good. So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good that I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.

Remember who is saying this. This is Paul the apostle—Saint Paul, the writer of half of the New Testament. This would be pretty discouraging if the end of the story was just to live with sin in our lives. A pattern of sin in our lives hardens our hearts.² When our hearts are hardened, we do not allow ourselves to be open to the leadings of the Holy Spirit and the guidance of wise counsel. We become inwardly focused and attempt to become self-sufficient. We begin to distance ourselves from the Lord, and even though He never abandons us, we attempt to abandon or ignore Him. When this happens, it is easy to feel distant and uninspired.

Worse yet, sin is very habit-forming. When we first relent and fall prey to sin, it may sting our conscience. However, each time we commit the same sin afterward, it becomes easier. Pretty soon we make excuses and eventually even play God and do not even call our actions sin. As Paul said above, what wicked men and women we are!

What is the answer? How can we avoid sin? We get some guidance from 1 John 1:8–9.

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Confession of our sins and prayer to guard us against future sin seems to be the key to minimizing the impact of sin in our lives. Confession requires communication, communication creates relationships, and relationships create an increasing bond that will make us more Christlike. This allows us to live lives more closely aligned with what the Father has in store for His children.

If communication and prayer are keys to a renewed life, we need to create space in our lives to have time to practice these disciplines. As will be discussed later in this book, the habit of retreat builds this space in our lives to allow for a focused time of confession and prayer.

Root Causes: The Pull of Culture

As if sin in our lives was not enough, there are several other factors that retard our spiritual growth. Next, let us explore the impact of culture on our growth into spiritual maturity.

Francis Schaeffer did a masterful job of outlining the separation of the spiritual from everyday life in his early works *Escape from Reason*³ and *The God Who Is There*⁴. Although certainly not an exhaustive analysis of all the events that resulted in our current bifurcated approach to life, his analysis does provide a reasoned basis for explaining the pervasive attitude among many Christians and non-Christians that church is a Sunday morning activity.

Summarizing his key thoughts, the combination of scientific analysis and philosophical thought led to a separation of spiritual matters from the nonspiritual. Utilizing Schaeffer's classic analogy, mankind established an upper and lower story for purposes of warehousing everyday actions

and thoughts. If something was provable under scientific analysis, it was placed in the lower story. If not, it resided in the upper story.

Schaeffer then argued that the introduction of Georg Hegel's dialectic⁵ opened the door for the proposition of the "loss of absolutes." Hegel is most noted for the concept that each proposition or thesis can be opposed with an antithesis. After a period of time, a dialogue between proponents of each results in a synthesis, or new thought. Since this process can be repeated an indefinite number of times, there is a constant refinement and redefinition of any proposition. Other than scientific facts that are fixed by the laws of nature, any nonscientific proposition is subject to future refinement.

Applied back to the upper and lower story, those ideas (such as religious faith) that reside in the upper story really have the status of opinions rather than facts. As such, they are subject to this process of continuous redefinition. With this cultural framework, the modern Christian is faced with the dilemma that his faith in Christ is really just his opinion. If he gains comfort from such beliefs, that is fine for him. However, one's faith is an entirely personal matter and best practiced in private on a Sunday morning with other individuals who just happen to "feel" the same way he does.

The purpose of this book is not to explain why this attitude toward faith is wrong. There are numerous volumes of apologetics that can respond to this issue. Suffice it to say that our Christian faith is a well-reasoned faith. Certainly within the definitions of legal proof, the historic existence and resurrection of Jesus can be proven. In addition, the reliability of the Bible as God's written Word to us can be reasonably accepted by an individual who has an open mind on the subject.

This pull of culture toward unbelief can be overwhelming and has only become more so with the advancement of technology that is now pervasive in our lives. The onslaught of information and ideas can leave one bewildered. Anyone with access to the Internet can locate volumes of information on any topic regardless of the quality of correctness of the ideas expressed.

We would all like to think that we can overcome this spiritual malaise imposed by the culture around us by just ignoring it. However, this book proposes that only by temporarily extracting oneself from the everyday activities and surroundings can you give yourself a real opportunity to reground yourself in the reasons for your faith and prepare yourself to go forth on your daily journey. By isolating yourself, even for only a few days a year, from the activities, concerns, pressures, and demands of daily living, you can truly regain your spiritual poise.

Even the act itself of making time in your schedule for an overnight retreat is countercultural. We live in a society that places demands on us 24/7. The thought of making time in our hectic schedules to get away and just spend time in prayer, meditation, and study just doesn't sound very practical. However, once you try it you can see what a life-affirming event it can be.

Root Causes: Boredom

The prayer of Agur in Proverbs 30:8–9 is one of the more unusual prayers in the Bible.

Remove far from me vanity and lies: give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food convenient for me. Lest I be full, and deny thee, and say “Who is the Lord?” or lest I be poor, and steal, and take the name of my God in vain.⁶

One of the most prayed prayers in the world is the Lord's Prayer, the Our Father. We pray to God the Father to “give us our daily bread.” How many of you have heard someone add the admonition “and Father, please don't make me rich”? That just is not in our nature. We always seem to want more. Yet Agur recognized one of the flaws we have in our nature. If we are too comfortable, we often forget the Lord and become lackadaisical in our faith.

Agur's prayer was basically "Don't let me be too comfortable." That's against human nature. We want to stay in our comfort zone, where it's warm, comfortable, and secure. Just as a bird feathers its nest, we want things to be soft, insulated, and familiar, but when you fail to break out of your comfort zone, boredom results—and boredom kills.

Look to John 15: 5: "I am the vine, you are the branches; apart from me nothing can be accomplished. He who abides in me bears much fruit." You can only accomplish something of spiritual significance if you depend on Christ. But you need to break out of your comfort zone in order to rely on Christ. When you are in water over your head, you will need Him. When you are just standing on the pier, you don't need Him, and He doesn't use you.

John Trapp wrote, "He that cannot pray, let him go to sea and there he will learn." If you say you can't pray—maybe you have never put yourself into a situation where you needed to pray. Lack of prayer life may just be an indication that you haven't left your comfort zone and don't feel the need to pray. But isn't this abandoning your comfort zone scary? Yes, but it is biblical.

Think back to Exodus and the story of Moses. Egyptians had enslaved the Israelites. They were being persecuted mercilessly. Someone needed to do something about it, and Moses would appear to be the ideal person. At age forty, he was in the prime of life. He was a Hebrew by birth but was raised in the royal court. He sensed he was the perfect person to correct things. Then one day, a fight broke out between an Egyptian and a Hebrew, and Moses solved the problem by killing the Egyptian. Killing Egyptians one at a time was a slow solution to the problem. God then sent him into the wilderness for forty years. When God came to him again and asked him to return to Egypt, he was eighty years of age. He said he was too old and slow of speech and couldn't accomplish the task. At that point God told him that he was ready.⁷

Hopefully not many of us will need a forty-year retreat to soften our hearts to do what God has planned for us. However, unless we break out of our comfort zones and confront God in a personal and intimate way, we may never truly feel His calling.

There is an old story attributed to Martin Luther. It is the story of the demon's reporting on their mischief back to Satan. The first team reports that they found a band of Christians crossing the desert and caused a sandstorm to come up and kill them all. Satan says, "Not bad, but they were Christians, and now they are just at home with the Lord." The second demon states that he found a shipload of Christians crossing the ocean and caused a great typhoon to come up, and now they are at the bottom of the sea. Again, Satan says, "Not bad, but again, you just sent them home to be with the Lord." The third demon gets up and says, "I have spent the last ten years lulling one Christian to sleep, and I just left him in his church," and all of the demons and Satan, upon hearing this, danced for joy. The moral of the story: boredom kills, and it is contagious.

The opportunity to spend time in retreat on a regular basis provides this opportunity to get out of our comfort zones. We are breaking our normal, daily routine. We are removing the distractions that can keep us from establishing true community with our God. We can challenge ourselves to step out in faith in our lives and to put ourselves in situations that require us to be more reliant on the Lord. It may be uncomfortable at first, but as we mature, we will realize that we are growing in our faith, and our ability to make a difference in this world will make us wonder why we always wanted to play it safe.

Root Causes: An Entertainment Culture

Related to the root cause of boredom is the secondary problem of living in a culture of entertainment. In Neil Postman's 1985 book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*⁸ he warns us that although many Americans feared the totalitarian state that was exemplified in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, where minds were controlled by brute force; the real threat to our society is better captured by Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, where our actions are controlled by our addiction to amusement.

Postman goes on to explain that particularly with the dawn of television, our perception of the world has been altered. Even the news

has become a commodity that is packaged in such a way that it fits neatly in to the shortened episodic integrated with commercials. This is quickly followed by the latest mind-numbing situational comedy or reality show. When we have events spoon-fed to us in such a visual way, the desire and pretty soon the skill to independently analyze, research, and conclude on the activities of the day is atrophied. Television alone is not the only culprit. Think of how advertising has influenced our outlook on every aspect of life.

Several years ago I purchased an issue of *Time* dated September 8, 1947. I acquired the magazine because the cover featured C. S. Lewis. I wanted the opportunity to read about Lewis as his contemporaries viewed him. This was pre-*Chronicles of Narnia*, and Lewis had made a name for himself as a Christian apologist, primarily due to his BBC radio broadcasts that were to serve as the foundation for his book *Mere Christianity*. What struck me as particularly remarkable were the length of the article and the complexity of the syntax and sentence structure. For a magazine designed for the reading pleasure of the general public, I viewed it as very challenging read.

The other thing that I noticed was how simple or maybe even simplistic the advertising was in the magazine. The advertisements were heavy on words and without exception in a rather nondramatic way outlined the utilitarian value of the product. Most of the pictures were actually unsophisticated drawings in lieu of highly professionalized photographs.

I then went to the local bookstore and purchased that current week's *Time*. There was very little in the way of in-depth articles in the magazine. Most of the topics warranted little more than a few hundred words, what some critics might call bathroom-reading-length writing. The content also seemed to have shifted from world and business news to entertainment news.

The change in the content and style of the advertising was remarkable. Word-intense advertising had given way to highly graphic and visual-oriented publishing. Even more remarkable was that the product being advertised was not always evident at first glance. Many of the pages featured athletes or other celebrities with one-word captions like "unstoppable" or "invincible," and only by a careful analysis of the

advertisement could you find the watch or the clothing that evidently made the wearer “unstoppable” or “invincible.” The advertisements had become more sophisticated and were selling based on image of the buyer instead of the quality and usefulness of the product.

In just the short span of sixty years between the two magazines, we had come full circle from where the articles were sophisticated and the advertising simplistic to where the reading material was simplistic and the advertising sophisticated. Is it little wonder that today’s generation (or arguably the last couple of generations) have had the way they look at and analyze God’s world and world events around them altered? Many people have lost the ability to think deeply or read richly. A recent survey had the following startling statistics:⁹

Eighty percent of families will not even buy one book in a given twelve-month period.

Forty-two percent of college students will never read another book after graduating.

Fifty percent of all Americans cannot read an eighth-grade-level book.

With this kind of degenerative state of thoughtful reflection and reading, is it any wonder that many Christians are losing the ability to reflect deeply on their faith and are relegating religion to just an emotional experience? Again, as this book progresses, the ability to separate oneself for even a few days to reanchor one’s faith on the bedrock of prayer, contemplation, study, and meditation can prove invaluable to staving off this culture of mind-numbing entertainment.

Root Causes: Fear and Shame

The last of the root causes that will be explored is one that is particularly sinister and troubling: the issues of fear and shame regarding the open practice of one’s faith. This is not the fear that someone might have that

lives in a part of the world where physical persecution and even death for openly practicing the Christian faith might occur. Rather, this is the fear that is accompanied by the shame of having your earthly reputation among your peers and neighbors at stake because they do not share your convictions about Jesus Christ. This is not the healthy fear that is being addressed in Proverbs 14:26, when the Bible states, “In the fear of the Lord one has strong confidence and his children will have refuge.” For this is not fear *of* the Lord, this is rather fear *of being associated with* the Lord. This is a fear that comes from being ashamed to be too visible about your faith.

Now, when you think about this situation, it is comical (in a tragic sort of way)! This is the Lord God Almighty—the maker of heaven and earth. He has the immutable characteristics of omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence. For us, His very finite creation, to be ashamed and afraid of being associated with him would be akin to us picking up an ant off the ground and having the ant say, “Could you put me down? I don’t want my friends to see me hanging around with you.”

You may laugh at the above scenario, but think honestly about your actions. It would be the rare individual who could unequivocally state that they had never hidden their faith from the public eye on occasion. Have you ever entered a restaurant with your Bible at the conclusion of a church service and “conveniently” covered it up with your coat? How about running in to an old friend as you exited a worship rally who asked you what you were doing only to hear your lips reply, “Nothing really.” To make the matter even more relevant (and potentially more painful), how about the times you are with family and friends and the topic of faith comes up and you remain painfully silent instead of giving the reason for the faith that is in you? Have you heard the cock crow three times in your life as well?

Why aren’t we the fearless, outspoken Christians we long to be? What are we afraid of? First, we fear of letting go of our reputations. Second, we have doubts about our faith. Lastly, we fear letting go of our piece of this world.

Woodrow Wilson once said, “I suspect it is as difficult doing your job with men sneering at you as it is shooting at you.” We all have egos and feel the need for acceptance. However, the reality every Christian has to face is that if you want to be the most popular person by earthly standards in your group of acquaintances, you will find it very difficult to live a consistently God-directed life. Unless you isolate yourself from the world (which isn’t the biblical perspective that asks us to be salt and light to the world¹⁰), you are going to find yourself in situations where you will either have to go along to get along or you will need to stand up for your Christian principles and risk being rejected. Our reputation, if measured by human standards, may in fact suffer for our faith. That should not be a surprise to any student of church history, as Christians have suffered down through the centuries for their unwillingness to compromise to the spirit of the age. As Paul encouraged us in 2 Timothy 1:8,

Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony about our God, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us Christ Jesus before the ages began.

We also have fear and shame because we often have doubts about our faith. Anyone who says they have never had any doubts or questions about their faith is either in denial or brain-dead. We are not yet sanctified creatures, and there are mysteries about our faith we will not understand this side of heaven. The worse thing we can do is to suppress these questions. This only deepens the fear and shame. Rather, we should confess our questions and then seek wisdom and guidance through study of the Scripture and the counsel of wise men. There is only one unanswered question contained in the word of God, and that is the question that is never asked. When in doubt, attack your fears. God has the answers.

A third type of fear is the fear of giving up our piece of this world. Again, Paul in 2 Timothy gave us guidance. In chapter two of that book, Paul admonished us to be good soldiers in the service of Christ: “Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to please the one that enlisted him.”¹¹ When we become too attached to the things of this world, we cannot be true soldiers of Christ. Just as a soldier headed off to battle takes only those items most vital to accomplishing his mission, so the dedicated Christian should minimize his attachment to the things of this world to allow maximum flexibility in his ability to serve the Lord.

The best response to the problem of fear and shame is to know God. When we have a close personal relationship with our Creator, there is little chance that we will as readily deny our relationship. I call once again on the wisdom of Paul and his advice to Timothy: “But I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me.”¹² The closer our relationship with the Lord, the stronger our beliefs will be, and the stronger our resolve to acknowledge Him as our Savior and King over our lives.

Knowing God provides us with an eternal perspective on life. When we can keep our priorities in life in order, we are in a much better position to be bold servants of the Lord. We won't succumb as easily to the fears of uncertainty and maintaining our earthly reputations. Where fear and shame are like a cancer that eats away at our ability to lead a dynamic life, knowing and fearing God are the cure.

The ability to partake in periodic retreats provides the opportunity to confront our fears and conquer our feeling of shame. The opportunity to spend concentrated time in study and growth in our love of God can establish habits that will last us throughout the year.

Summary

We live in a fallen world, although God has promised us the strength to overcome the temptations of this world. First Corinthians 10:13 tells us, “No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with temptation, he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.” This chapter outlined some of these common temptations. The opportunity to practice spiritual retreat is one of those ways to escape.

When you look up the definition of retreat, you may be tempted to just think of it just as a place to rest or retire. However, the more appropriate way to look at is in the military sense. In battle, one army may retreat for strategic reasons. They may be out-manned or out-manuevered. However, the objective of the retreat is to refresh and rearm so that when the next battle occurs, the chances for victory are enhanced. We are fighting a mighty Enemy, and we need to be just as well armed as the soldier is in Ephesians 6:11.¹³

We also recognize that something about this world is not quite right. We realize that this is not really our home.¹⁴ We have a sense of discomfort and awkwardness about our daily lives. The obligations and cares of this world do not allow us to live our lives as focused on the Lord and His work as we might want. The opportunity to remove ourselves for a few days allows us to lead a life closer to what Christ modeled for us. Dorothy Bass describes this opportunity in her preface to her book *Practicing Our Faith*.¹⁵

Every summer, my family visits a retreat center high in the mountains. My husband delights in the hiking and fishing; I thrive on the absence of phones, televisions, and grocery stores; and the children revel in the freedom they have to roam about unsupervised in a small, safe, mostly outdoor community of friends. All of us enjoy the natural splendor of this place. But there is also something stronger and deeper that keeps us going

back, something harder to describe. When we are there, we slip into a way of life that comes pretty close to our vision of how things are supposed to be. As staff members, we work; we consume appropriately, eating lower on the food chain and doing without the goods and gadgets that usually clutter our lives; we worship daily. In other words, we enter a community shaped by shared practices that make sense, and as we adjust to them we feel ourselves becoming a little different, a little better.¹⁶

No one seems to question the need for periodic vacations from our earthly work. For many families, this time away from the routine of life is highly anticipated and planned for months in advance. Yet as beneficial as time away from our jobs may be to physically rejuvenate us, how much more beneficial might a time away to reflect on the bigger picture of life be to rejuvenate our soul?

Hopefully this chapter has convinced you that the answer to “Who needs retreat?” is simple. Everyone does, and in particular, you do. But before proceeding directly to the question of “What comprises a true spiritual retreat?” it will be beneficial to examine the historical context of retreat as part of our Christian faith.